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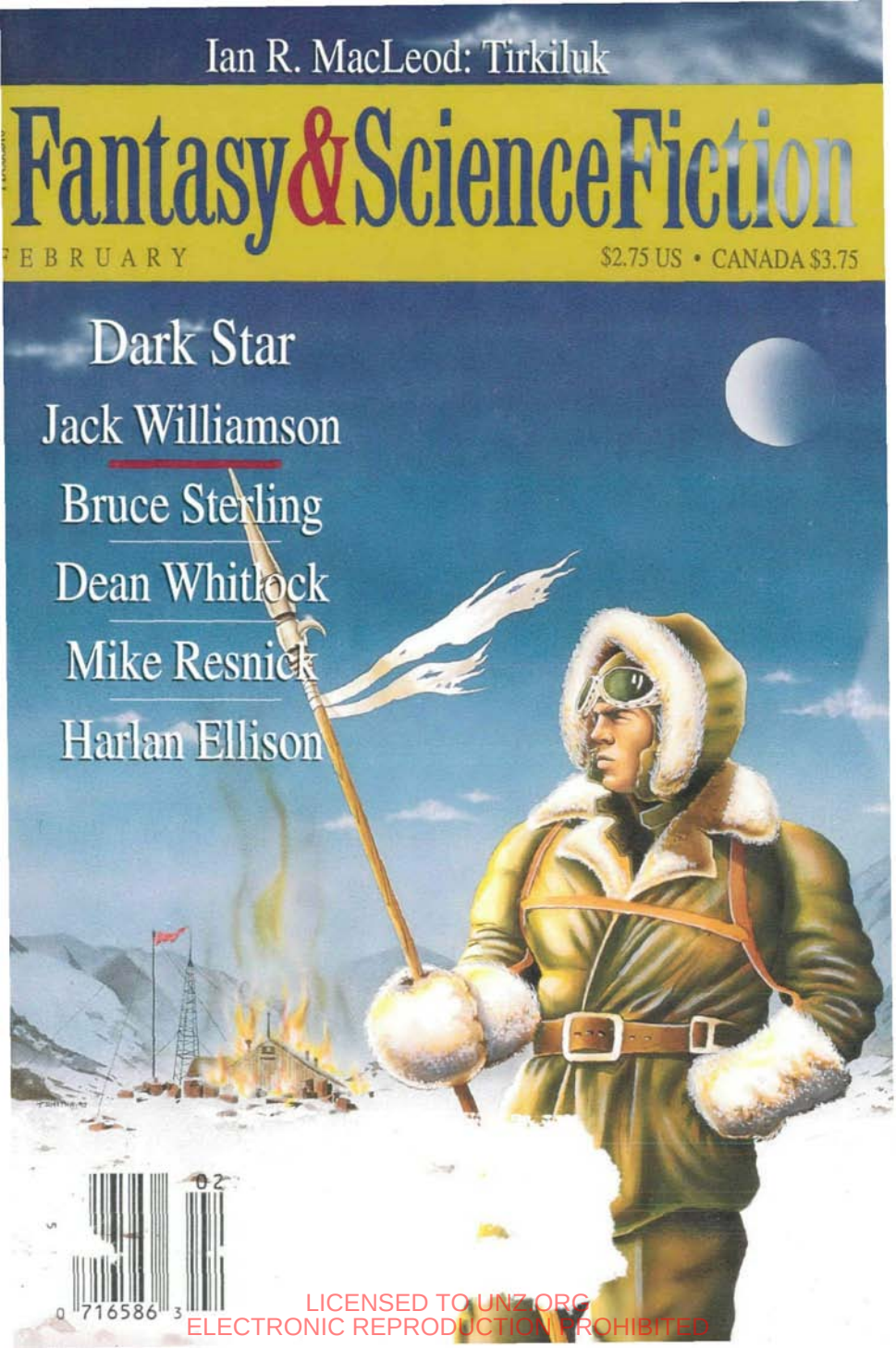

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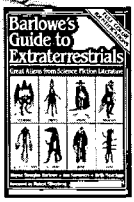

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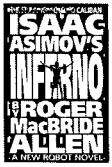

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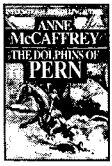

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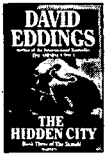

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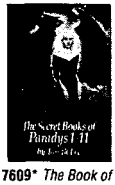

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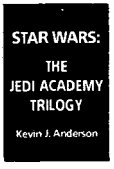

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EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

EVERY FEW years, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* surveys its readers. This is a customary practice in the world of periodicals: advertisers want information about a magazine's readership before deciding to place an ad. The subscription base and content of the magazine are not enough. Advertisers also want to know if subscribers are old or young, rich or poor, married or single.

The surveys have other uses as well. When I became editor of *F&SF*, Ed Ferman (former editor and current publisher) sent me a copy of the most recent survey so I understood who the readership was, and how it differed from the readership of *Pulphouse: The Hardback Magazine* which I had edited previously.

Ed sent out a new survey this summer. This time it had a two-fold purpose which he stated on his summary sheet in this manner:

1) Developing demographic and buying information for advertisers.

2) Asking for feedback and preferences about the current editorial content of *F&SF*.

Since Ed had stepped down as editor and hired me in the period between surveys, point two made sense. It also made me nervous. Still, he had me approve the survey before it went out and the only change I made was to correct the typo in one of the columnists' names.

When the results of the survey came in, I spent two days avoiding them. Finally, I glanced at it all and was relieved to find that you folks enjoy the magazine, even with all the changes. Ed suggested that we report the results of the survey in the magazine, and so we shall. This editorial and the next will discuss what we learned from our reader survey. This month I will talk about what the survey shows about our readers, and next month I will discuss content.

The disturbing news in the survey, surprisingly enough, comes in the demographic information. Our readership is getting older. The bulk of the readers fall in the 26-55 year

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age group. Only two percent of our readers are under the age of eighteen. Only five percent are between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. In Ed's analysis of the information, he notes that this trend also appeared in the survey done recently by the science fiction trade magazine *Locus*. It seems that the folks who read *F&SF* are middle-aged. (Fifty-five percent of our readers are over 35.) This seems to be a trend in sf in general. I could (and probably will) write an entire column about this phenomenon. I don't have statistics for romance, mystery, western, or mainstream fiction, so I don't know how we compare. But the fact that sf is losing its young readers is a problem for the genre. It is also curious, given the rise in popularity of sf films, games, and video games.

But I digress. The only other surprise is that 94 percent of our readers own a VCR — and, I assume, know how to program it. Seventy-five percent own some kind of computer, and 30 percent a video game system. This level of electronic competence makes sense when you compare it with the income and educational statistics: Most of the readers make between $26,000 and $75,000 per year, 93 percent have attended college, and 28 percent have post-graduate degrees.

The average reader is a married man who owns a house. Our female readership is up, though, from the last survey. Almost 40 percent of the readership is female now.

Some other interesting reader statistics: Most readers have not attended a science fiction convention (70 percent). But if you break this down between male and female readers, only 24 percent of the men have attended a convention while 50 percent of the women have. (I can't explain this, since sf conventions have always seemed, to me, to be predominantly male.) About 40 percent of *F&SF's* readers also read the Dell sf magazines (*Asimov's* and *Analog*). Most of the readers buy books (averaging 14 hardcovers and 24 paperbacks per year). Readers buy more videos than movie tickets, and more collectibles than video games. Sixty-five percent of the folks with a computer have an on-line service, with the bulk of those people talking to each other (and our columnists!) on the Internet. (Ye olde editor is part of the minority, scanning the lonely message boards on GEnie.)

Finally, the *F&SF* specific numbers: 48 percent of the respondents have been reading *F&SF* longer than 11 years. Another 12 percent have been with us six to ten years, and 28 percent have read the magazine for two to five years. Thanks, folks, for the long term support! Most readers

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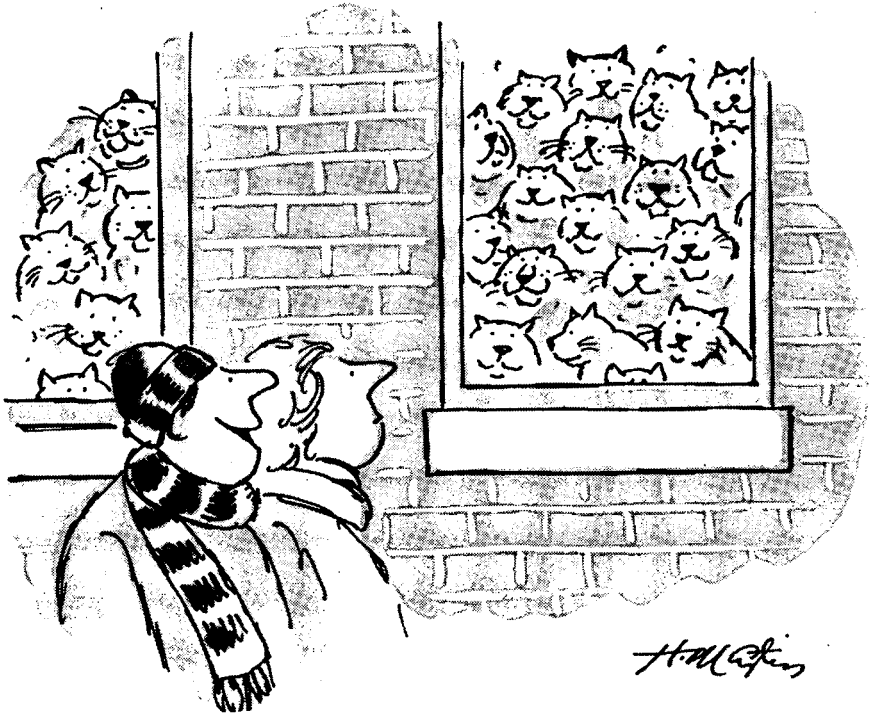
spend an hour or more a month with the magazine, and 71 percent of our readers save their issue longer than one year after reading it.

The good news in the survey is that readers tend to stay with the magazine for a long time, even with all the changes of the past few years. The bad news is that our readership is aging (along with the rest of science fiction's readership). Some have suggested that this is because the entire population is aging. But I think we need to examine other possibilities. Is sf in a decline, like the western was a few years back? Are young people not reading anymore? Or has the literature of science fiction become more sophisticated, appealing to the more mature reader? I would love to get comments and opinions on this.

Next month, a look at the survey results on editorial content.



"Sometimes when you see how other people live, you realize how really fortunate you are."

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D. William Shunn's first published short story, "From Our Point of View We Had Moved to the Left," (February, 1993) created quite a sensation when it appeared. His short fiction has also appeared in Science Fiction Age *and* Washed by a Wave of Wind, *an anthology edited by F&SF author M. Shayne Bell (Signature Books, 1994).*

"Kevin$_{17}$" is a near-future science fiction story which shows yet again that Bill Shunn is a writer to watch.

Kevin$_{17}$

By D. William Shunn

i. From the diaries of Richard L. Metcalfe, Ph.D.

MONDAY, APRIL 7, 2025. It's the first day of public school for my little flock of Kevins, a landmark date in our experiment — and for some reason I'm unable to put away the gun.

Looking back through these diaries, I see that it was August 13, 2018 — another Monday — that my predecessor used this gun to splatter his brains across the plate-glass window opposite this desk, like some mad expressionist splashing housepaints across a giant canvas. I've never much liked Mondays, either, actually.

Before me rises majestic Mount Timpanogos, possibly the most striking mountain in Utah, the mythical Indian maid who sleeps atop still shrouded beneath her sparkling mantle of snow. The sky is a deep azure, the same color as my little Kevins' eyes, and the mountain's flanks are swathed in a brilliant pine green. I find it difficult to believe that anyone could kill himself in sight of such splendor, but Jacob Kellerman did. As if to spite Nature herself.

He called himself Jacob Kellerman, but today I can think of him only by his birth name — Lawrence$_1$. Today...as the twenty-three boys we cloned

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over the summer of 2013 venture into the world for the first time. The day he anticipated for so long, but in the end was not strong enough to witness.

Today...as I regard what to the Utes is a sacred mountain...as I toy with the .38 automatic that took Lawrence$_1$'s life.

I expect Lauren Atwater any time, condemning this newest cruelty of mine. The boys were farmed out over the weekend, and she wasn't told they were going. She won't be happy.

But she's a scientist. She'll follow this phase of the experiment closely, despite herself. She takes an interest in the boys already that's more than clinical. I wonder how much she knows? I'm sure she suspects more than she lets on. I wonder. I wonder...

I wonder how the barrel of this gun would feel pressed against my temple? A cold circle of death...an icy kiss...? I wonder what we'll learn about Barkakati's malady, the disorder that killed Jacob Kellerman. I wonder what we'll learn from our scrawny little towheaded Kevins.

No one will take a greater interest in the answers than I. That much I know, if nothing else.

ii. Kevin$_{17}$

"Class," said Mrs. Fripp, "today we'd like to welcome a new student."

Kevin stared at his smooth, dully reflective desktop, a slow terror building inside him. He could feel the eyes of the forty other students. His cheek burned where his new mother had kissed him when she dropped him off at school, and he was sure it had left a mark that everyone could see. He had never had a mother before, or a father either. He didn't think he liked it. He *knew* he didn't like this school. It was in Camden, New Jersey, across the Delaware from Philadelphia — twenty-one hundred miles from Orem, Utah. Too far, too far...he'd never see home again...never see his brothers...

"Will you write your name for us, please, Kevin, so we can get to know you?" said Mrs. Fripp. Her face was grainy with too much makeup, and blue mascara clotted in her eyelashes. She was old. Kevin thought she might be as old as Dr. Metcalfe, the oldest person he knew — mid-forties. "Your stylus is inside your desk."

Kevin sat in the next-to-last row. Children were craning to watch him, whispering. Fighting the urge to flee, Kevin found his lightpen. It was an old

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model, too fat, like the kind he and his brothers had used when they were three and first learning to write. He wrote his name quickly but with care, not looking up when he finished. From habit he had almost written "Kevin Seventeen," but then he remembered how Dr. Metcalfe had said he should write his name from now on. The neat letters glowed on his desktop.

Mrs. Fripp touched a button at her console, and Kevin's writing appeared on the matte-black viewboard at the front of the room, amid silhouetted ducks and rabbits cut from holographic foil. "Kevin Severton," she read, smiling to the class with dark red lips. "Kevin has just moved here from Utah. Who can tell us where Utah is? Yes, Felicia?"

"It's way out in the boondoggles," said a dark-skinned girl with straggling black hair. Kevin had never seen anyone with dark skin back home at the Institute.

"Well, hmm, I suppose," said Mrs. Fripp, still smiling. "Perhaps we should study Utah in our next geography unit, hmm? But class, Kevin is a special child, and I hope you'll be ultra-nice to him. Help him feel at home."

Something hit Kevin in the back of the head. "You're special, huh?" whispered a sneering voice from behind him. "What are you, some kind of disfunk? You a crack baby, or what? They give your mother the chair, crack baby? That why you're here?"

The boy thumped Kevin again with his lightpen. Kevin didn't dare tell him to stop. He didn't understand what the boy was saying, but the mention of a mother made him think about Dr. Atwater. He missed Dr. Atwater a lot. He missed Dr. Metcalfe, too, though he wasn't always a nice man, but most of all he missed his brothers, especially Kevin9. He was never going to see them again, any of them. He felt like crying.

"Kevin has a birthday later this week, class," said Mrs. Fripp. "He's going to be eleven, so you can all look forward to cake Friday during our social-skills unit. Now, let's all bring up our current math unit on our desktops, shall we? We were learning about unions and intersections of sets when we left off last week."

Kevin closed his eyes, his lower lip beginning to tremble. He and his brothers had been learning integral calculus a week ago. He wondered where his brothers were, if they were as scared and lonely as he was. He wished he were away from this place. He wished he were *anywhere* but here. Even being *dead* would be better than being here...

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The lightpen struck him again. "Happy birthday, disfunk," whispered the sneering boy.

iii. From the diaries of Richard L. Metcalfe, Ph.D.

Wednesday, April 9, 2025. As the initial reports filter in this morning, my thoughts are troubled. Lauren's been in to see me at least twice a day since Monday, and her ravings about how I plan to kill the boys off haven't helped matters any. Perhaps a brief review of this experiment and its objectives will help impose some order on my thoughts.

Barkakati's malady is a psychological disorder first described in the late 1890s by Dr. Salahuddin Barkakati of Calcutta. It manifests itself shortly before puberty, when its victims begin to develop a profound sense of despair and self-loathing. Attempts to injure themselves are common. The victims are invariably male, as Barkakati noted, and rarely survive into adulthood unless institutionalized. The disorder runs in families.

We know today that Barkakati's malady is transmitted via a recessive gene, and that penetrance for the trait when a recessive-recessive pair is present runs close to 98%. We also know that regular applications of estrogen seem to ameliorate the affects of the disorder somewhat.

In 1972 Dr. Ian Rodgers, together with his widowed sister, Dr. Enid Rodgers Lawrence, both biologists, embarked on a clandestine and highly unethical experiment. The Barkakati gene seemed to run in their family — had killed an older brother, in fact. Their object was to study the course of the malady, and possible cures, under controlled conditions.

They repeatedly collected ripe oocytes from Enid's ovaries hours before she was due to ovulate. These barely mature eggs were then fertilized *in vitro* with Ian's sperm. The resulting embryos were frozen after two or three cell divisions, with a DNA sample taken from each.

Ian and Enid each carried one of the recessive genes, so it followed that a quarter of their embryos would end up with the recessive-recessive pair. When they had isolated such an embryo, they thawed it, allowed it to progress to the 32-blastomere stage, then dissociated these thirty-two cells with applications of a protein-digesting enzyme.

The other frozen embryos were thawed, and their inner-cell mass removed. A Barkakati-carrying cell was inserted into each of these enucle-

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ated blastocysts, where it began dividing like a freshly fertilized embryo. These cloned embryos were frozen, then thawed one by one over the next several years and introduced into Enid's uterus via the cervical canal.

Only four of these genetically identical embryos were carried to term. The first, $Lawrence_1$, was born in 1978, the last — and certainly most unusual — $Lawrence_4$, in 1985. All but $Lawrence_3$ survived to adulthood.

The Rodgers Institute, which began with a tiny lab in the University of Utah's Research Park, flourished in the 1990s with the development of several patented strains of waste-consuming bacteria. $Lawrence_1$ had almost unlimited funds at his disposal when he inherited the Institute in 2007 — and recruited Lauren and me to help him repeat Ian and Enid's initial experiment.

Now Lauren wants us to abort. I can't let that happen. She doesn't understand the importance of our work, the necessity of duplicating the conditions of the original experiment as closely as possible. In fact, she doesn't even *know* about the original experiment — though she's a good enough scientist to suspect something, I'm afraid.

The Kevin series are genetically very similar to the Lawrences. We are using them to learn whether environment wields any influence on Barkakati's malady, or if its effects are exclusively hereditary.

This end overrides any other concerns. It must. My hands are shaking. This office is three stories up. I've polarized the plate glass so I can't see out, can't contemplate my mountain and its sleeping maiden. I hate to do it, but I had to.

Sometimes I really despise myself — and it's a long way to the ground.

iv. $Kevin_{17}$

Kevin trudged through the dirty snow at the edge of the playground. It was his third day in Camden, and his new mother had laced his boots up so tightly that morning that he had been unable to undo the knots when he arrived at school. When he asked permission to use the restroom, he had clunked down the aisle like Paul Bunyan in seven-league boots, then clunked back while the other students whispered and tittered behind their hands.

Now it was the morning recess, which meant only three-quarters of the day remained. Three-quarters of six-and-a-half hours was...four hours, fifty-two minutes, and thirty seconds. Too long, too long. He wanted to lie down in the snow...pull it over the top of him...just go away until school was over...

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The electric buses that brought the preschoolers had arrived, and the smell of ozone was heavy in the air. Kevin was watching the small children scurry into the building when something cold and yielding and metallic hit him in the side of the head.

"Hey, disfunk!" It was Jeremy Jones, the boy who sat behind Kevin in class. Jeremy caught the Mylar playground ball on the rebound. He was standing on the wet blacktop about ten feet away with several of his friends. "You're supposed to *catch* the ball, crack baby. You flunk recess. Better get inside with the other babies."

Jeremy's friends laughed. Kevin wanted to run, but he couldn't move. Dirty water trickled down his cheek. "Lookit the crack baby cry!" someone said, pointing.

"Mrs. Frizzhead says we're supposed to be mega-careful around you, disfunk," said Jeremy, advancing, casually dribbling the Mylar ball. "Says we're not supposed to hurt you. Whatsamatter? You on the skids or what?"

Kevin knew a lot of things. He knew how to integrate *n*th-order polynomials. He could describe the economic forces strangling the region's steel industry. He even knew all about the virulent SKIDS epidemic — suppressokinesthetic immune deficiency syndrome, the first symptoms of which were loss of motor sense in the joints and limbs — and could describe the most common vectors by which it was transmitted.

But he didn't know why these boys hated him — and he didn't know why he felt frozen, like he couldn't move.

Jeremy heaved the ball suddenly, two-handed, and it struck Kevin in the face. Kevin fell and landed on his butt in the slushy snow. Real tears trickled down his cheeks.

"We're gonna get you, skid kid," said Jeremy viciously, while all around him his friends laughed.

A tone sounded the end of recess. The boys left Kevin sitting in the snow, crying, where he could think only of blackness, and how lovely it would be to visit it.

v. From the diaries of Richard L. Metcalfe, Ph.D.

Thursday, April 10, 2025. Lauren Atwater just left, but I can still hear her voice as she came barging into the room: "Kevin$_9$ is dead, you bastard.

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$Kevin_{21}$ is in intensive care. $Kevin_3$, $Kevin_{14}$, and $Kevin_{20}$ have all been hospitalized as well. I hope you're satisfied."

I knew this already, of course, but I was definitely not satisfied.

Our foster families file daily reports on their new sons' moods and temperaments, and we get detailed reports from their teachers on any incidents that may take place at school. We've paid well for this information — $250,000 grants to each district hosting a Kevin, plus assurances that our boys carry no blood-borne diseases such as SKIDS. We both follow the reports closely.

But Lauren knows the big secret now. I see it by the cold flashing fury in her eyes. Her maternal instincts are beginning to surface — and they're doing it with a vengeance.

She's not their biological mother, of course, but rather their genetic mother. Every woman employed at the Institute has contributed ova over the years, just as the men donate their semen. Acquiring Lauren's genetic material was a routine matter, and carrying her cloned children to term in artificial placentae only slightly less so.

Lauren — whose birth name is $Lawrence_4$ — is unique among Ian and Enid's offspring. She was created as a contingency, by bathing the embryo in Enid's womb with estrogen before the onset of its sexual differentiation, to provide a reliable source of Barkakati-carrying eggs for future experimentation.

Lauren was given up for adoption soon after birth, but the Institute kept close tabs on her. When she received her doctorate in genetics — no real surprise, given the frequency with which monozygotic twins reared apart have been shown to live parallel lives — the Rodgers Institute recruited her immediately.

The males of the Lawrence series — unlike Lauren — were raised knowing precisely who they were and how they came to be. They grew up in an accelerated learning environment, sheltered from the world — until 1991, when the rest of the scientific community began asking the wrong questions about activities at the Institute. In a panic, Ian and Enid sent the three boys to foster homes.

The two older boys were on estrogen by then. $Lawrence_3$ was due to start soon after, but his new parents didn't take the Institute's warnings, nor the medication it supplied, seriously enough.

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Lawrence$_3$ didn't fit in at his new school. He had no friends. He was picked on, persecuted, tormented. He drank a quart of paint thinner in the attic of his new home one night and wasn't discovered until late the next morning.

We've tried to raise our Kevins exactly as the Lawrences were raised. They share quarters in groups of three and four. They have been sent away at roughly the same age. What they don't know, that the Lawrences did, is that they carry the Barkakati gene.

Can any of them beat Barkakati's malady on his own? That's our biggest question. Estrogen treatments are not pleasant. They leave the subjects moody and ill-tempered, change the pitch of the voice, cause some breast development which makes the chest sore and tender. Is there a better way to tame the disorder?

One of our boys is dead. Four more are injured, one seriously. And Lauren, a genetic male with runaway maternal instincts, is trying to disrupt the whole experiment.

If she knows how similar her DNA is to that of the Kevin series, then she may suspect that her eggs were fertilized with sperm from a donor genetically identical to herself. Jacob Kellerman underwent plastic surgery to reconstruct the bones of his face before Lauren ever met him, and he always kept his blond hair dyed black, but I wonder if she saw through the disguise?

I wonder how strong her own self-hate is?

She's boarding a shuttle for Philly. I can't stop her. Kevin$_9$ and Kevin$_{17}$ were unusually close. Kevin$_{17}$ idolized his older brother, adopted many behavioral cues from him. I'm sure Lauren considers Kevin$_{17}$ the likeliest candidate for our next successful suicide.

She's sure the experiment has failed, but she doesn't understand. The experiment will not be a failure until the last boy is dead.

Look at this hand. I'm trembling like a fault line. The slumbering maid atop Mount Timpanogos is shrouded in mist this afternoon. The Utes say the gods have placed her heart in the center of the mountain. I saw it once, years ago, before the National Park System folded — a massive double stalactite resembling a human heart, backlit by red floodlights deep within Timpanogos Cave.

Sometimes, when my medication leaves me surly and confused, I think that *I'm* the maiden, that it's *my* heart there under the mountain. I have no better explanation for where it's gone.

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Ah, well. Let Lauren do what she will. I suppose we can afford to sacrifice one boy without upsetting the experiment.

Still, I tend to doubt she'll be there in time.

vi. $Kevin_{17}$

"Kevin! Kevin!" The voice was low, urgent; a hand tugged at the sleeve of his jacket.

Kevin turned. The air was cold, but the sun shone brightly. His new mother had just dropped him off at school, and her car was humming away, puffing ozone. Kevin didn't want her to leave. He didn't like her nearly as much as he did Dr. Atwater, but he had a terrible feeling inside and didn't want to be left alone. It was as if something awful had happened, or *would* happen, or both...and there was darkness at the edges of his vision...creeping in...

"Kevin, I gotta talk to you!" It was a boy from his class named Erik Hofstaedtler. Erik's hair stood up in back in a permanent rocket-tail, and his eyes bulged slightly due to corrective surgery, making him resemble a bug. "Jeremy and Herve and them are looking for you. They said they're gonna crash your system, as a birthday present!"

His birthday. Kevin felt dizzy, nauseated. He was eleven today—he had forgotten — and he was going to die. But he found he wasn't surprised. The blackness crept in closer around his eyes...

"Kevin! Kevin! Are you okay?" Erik looked around as anxiously as if they were in the path of a speeding train. "Don't panic, huh? Come and sit down."

Erik led Kevin through the milling crowd of children to a bench at the side of the school, and they sat. Erik drew an old pocketknife from his coat and began absently cleaning his fingernails, apparently a nervous habit. "You can beat them, Kevin. You're the smartest kid in class by a long launch, and *they're* totally wiped upstairs. You scare them. Why else would they hate you so much?"

"I...I don't know," said Kevin, squeezing shut his eyes. The names they called him were cycling through his head — disfunk, crack baby, space invader, skid kid...

"Listen, Kevin, you can outsmart them. You've *got* to. They pick on me, too, but I can't stop them! You can!"

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Kevin looked at Erik, and saw something that shocked him. Erik was staring at Kevin the same way Kevin knew *he* used to stare at his older brother Kevin9. Erik, unconsciously cleaning dirt from his fingernails, was waiting for Kevin to save them both.

Skid kid...toy boy...

"I...I can't," Kevin said, his heart aching, and the blackness around him seemed to swell. It was coming to get him, swallowing him, enfolding him...

"Kevin, *please*." Unshed tears glimmered in the corners of Erik's eyes. "You've got to."

A knot of boys suddenly rounded the corner of the school. "There you are, you little crack baby," said Jeremy Jones, smacking one fist into the other.

Erik turned white. And the blackness in Kevin's vision seemed to harden. He found he didn't really want to die. "Give me your knife," he said under his breath.

His hands were trembling as Erik set the pocketknife in his palm.

"Stand up," said Jeremy, stopping before them with his fists on his hips and five other boys clustered behind him in a tight phalanx. Spectators were beginning to gather. "Come on and stand up, disfunk! Or are the brains in your butt too heavy?"

Crack baby...skid kid...skid kid...

Kevin slashed the knife blade across the fingers of his open-palmed left hand. Then he stood up.

Jeremy stared with wide eyes as blood dripped from Kevin's hand. "Hey, what is that?" he said, shaken but trying to hide it. "Some twisted Utah crack baby ritual?"

Kevin moved as fast as he could. He ran straight at Jeremy, jumped on him, crammed the bloody fingers of his left hand into the boy's mouth as they both toppled over. Jeremy gagged, tried to scream. Kevin leaned on Jeremy's face with his free hand, forcing his fingers to the back of the boy's throat. Then Jeremy's friends were pulling Kevin off, and Jeremy sat up, spitting blood from his mouth, choking. "You're really crashed now, disfunk."

"You were right yesterday, you know," said Kevin, struggling to free himself. He wrenched loose his left arm and thrust forward his hand. "I have it. I'm a skid kid. Now you are, too."

Jeremy's friends released Kevin, backed away fast. The semicircle of watching children widened, too.

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Jeremy didn't move. A dark, wet stain spread out from the crotch of his pants.

"Have a nice life," said Kevin and walked away. The day really was beautiful. He hadn't noticed it earlier, but it was. The sunlight felt good on his face.

Very, very good.

vii. From the diaries of Richard L. Metcalfe, Ph.D.

Friday, April 11, 2025. The boys are coming home. And here I am playing with this stupid gun again.

There's no point in keeping them away after what happened this morning in Camden. $Kevin_{17}$. Who'd have thought he had it in him?

There's nothing in our literature on Barkakati's malady to explain his behavior. It's as if he just...*decided* not to give in to the gene, fought back. Won.

Lauren arrived on the scene not long after the incident and called me. I watched her cry on the phone — don't ask me why she did. She should have been happy. She asked if I was satisfied yet, and I said that I was. All these years, she's accused me of putting my faith in the scientific method and nothing else, and of course she's been right. I was raised on the scientific method. Growing up, it was my only religion. All my life I've known no other god.

As I gaze out at the mountain — radiant, magnificent in the late afternoon light — I feel pity for the Indian maid who sleeps on top. My god has returned my heart.

Looking back, it seems so silly now, the way I've spent my life. Living in fear, trying to justify the fact that I'm still alive. Forever toying with this gun, as if it were a riddle in need of deciphering — the gun that killed my older brother.

$Kevin_{17}$ has shown me hope. Hope that I can be free of the estrogen that has kept me prisoner since I was eleven. Hope that I, too, can face down the Barkakati demon lurking in my DNA.

Hope that I will have many, many years to learn to deal with the guilt crashing down all around me.

I am Richard Metcalfe no longer. Call me $Lawrence_2$.

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BOOKS

ROBERT K.J. KILLHEFFER

Mother of Storms, John Barnes, Tor Books, 432pp, $22.95

Random Acts of Senseless Violence, Jack Womack, Grove/Atlantic, 256pp, $21.00

Heavy Weather, Bruce Sterling, Bantam Spectra, 320pp, $21.95

Half the Day Is Night, Maureen F. McHugh, Tor Books, 320pp, $21.95

TO MOST people, particularly those who don't read sf, science fiction and the future are nearly synonymous. They expect sf to illuminate "things to come" in some way, be it prophetic or cautionary, utopian or inspirational; and they judge its success based on its predictive power alone. Even regular readers in the field would agree that the genre's principal vector is forward in time.

But, of course, sf rarely concerns itself with any actual, possible future. No matter how far down the timeline it's set, sf usually ends up being about the present, offering more insight into our current circumstances than sound predictions of tomorrow.

The Future According to Barnes

Take a look at *Mother of Storms*, John Barnes's latest, an epic disaster thriller set thirty-odd years from now. One of the first things we learn about the world of 2028 is that the United Nations has become the most powerful political force on the planet, commanding its own forces in preventive strikes around the globe. I don't think Barnes intends this as any sort of serious prediction — that would be pretty hard to swallow, as the U.N. of today seems unable to handle international crises of any kind, and tragedies such as those in Bosnia and Rwanda, conflicts in Yemen and countless other places, proceed nearly unchecked. But Barnes's scenario perfectly captures the feeling of our

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country's current confusion over the changing map of world politics. The opening scene shows the U.N. in conflict with a rogue Siberian state, led by a mad Islamic fanatic, stockpiling weapons for use in international terrorism. Sound familiar? Check your newspaper. As Barnes's larger plot gathers momentum, and global catastophe looms, his feelings about a dominant U.N. become clearer — U.N. news bulletins are heavily censored, and the U.N. leadership seems short-sighted and belligerent. Barnes opposes the U.N. with U.S. President Brittany Lynn Hardshaw, a crafty and ruthless leader, who aims to recapture the United States' former international hegemony. (Whether you support such an effort or not, it's hard not to root for her when the survival of civilization may rest on her success.) The political structure of Barnes's future is born of our growing sense of insecurity and fears of fading empire, a fantasy of future powerlessness and a return to glory.

But politics are only one small part of Barnes's future vision. The disaster plot at the heart of *Mother of Storms* likewise derives from ambient fears plaguing us today. The U.N.'s preemptive missile strike against the Siberians disrupts a large tract of ocean floor in the north Pacific, releasing a tremendous cloud of methane gas which had been trapped in sea floor deposits. Billions of tons of methane sharply boost the greenhouse effect, and median temperatures suddenly rise several degrees around the world. But the heat itself is not the main problem — much worse are the gigantic hurricanes spawned by the overheated atmosphere. They blast the islands of Hawaii and Indonesia, swamp the coasts of California, Mexico, and the Pacific Northwest, and — once they cross Central America into the Gulf of Mexico — they whirl around the Atlantic too, inundating the Low Countries, sending a tidal wave across Ireland, and threatening the cities of the American Eastern seaboard. Even worse, they show no signs of dying off as normal hurricanes would, they just keep roving over the oceans, picking up power and speed for new attacks. As the havoc worsens and the death toll climbs into the tens and even hundreds of millions, it seems clear that unless someone finds a way to stop the storms, they'll scour the globe until civilization itself collapses.

It's hard to imagine a more severe enactment of ecological nightmare, a stronger statement of today's worries about what irreversible damage we may already have done to our environment. But Barnes plays fair; for all that his main plot rests on

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ecocatastrophe, he also weaves into his future some backlash against PC green guiltmongering. One of the most effective characterizations in *Mother of Storms* shows Naomi Cascade — a child of "Deepers," guilty to the nth degree, who hold that any sort of personal pleasure is sinful selfishness — as she evolves under the pressures of the storm from tiresome Deeper to sensible seeker after happiness. Having come so close to death she discovers a healthy taste for (relatively simple) comforts and pleasures.

Barnes presents his future world on a broad canvas, and many other facets of *Mother of Storms* clearly arise from contemporary issues. In 2028, the space program has dwindled to a tiny space station manned by a lone astronaut, Louie Tynan, a misanthrope who prefers solitary orbital life to a return to crowded Earth. Computer networks have infiltrated every aspect of daily life, and entertainment is dominated by XV, a virtual-reality version of television in which viewers receive the whole experience of whatever character they tune in to. Barnes explains that XV "was denounced roundly for being even more attention-absorbing than television. It was also praised highly because it allowed anyone to have the experience instantly of knowing how to do a thing and of doing it." Like television, XV was touted for its educational potential, but in 2028, it's almost nothing but schlock programming — pornographic soap operas on "Passionet," you-are-there coverage of crimes and disasters, and so on. XV's immersive visceral realism has already proven dangerous, spawning the "Global Riot," a worldwide paroxysm of violence experienced by millions of XV users, whose voyeuristic frenzy fed the flames and led to millions of deaths.

Most of these elements blend smoothly to evoke a coherent future world, but at times Barnes's efforts to bring as many contemporary issues into play get a little distracting; the subplot about kiddie-porn snuff XV tapes in particular seemed unnecessarily lurid and trivialized.

Barnes tends to lecture in his effort to show us so many aspects of the future, but by and large his lectures are the better sort, informative without being dull, and only as long as necessary for the tale. His depiction of the physics of weather formation, of the information network and the semi-intelligent virus-like programs that inhabit it, and of Louie Tynan's audacious plan to stop the storms and save the world (it involves bringing a comet back to Earth with an ingenious mass-acceleration system), provide the hard-science fan with plenty of nuggets to chew on

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without slowing the story or interrupting the drama.

It's Louie's plan and its execution that elevate *Mother of Storms* from simply a good, exciting disaster story into an impressive and thought-provoking science fiction novel. Beginning with Louie's transformation from mere mortal into superpowerful megamind (by linking his consciousness with the global computer network), and proceeding with his self-launch and rapid acceleration out to a nearby comet, the sf reader's antennae will be up and receiving, thrilled especially by the implications of Barnes's space-accelerator concept. I'm not sure I agree with the conception of the mind that Barnes adopts in order to make Louie's merging with the machine possible, and once he's got that computing power he manages some miracles that stretch the tendons of credulity, but their very implausibility makes one wonder whether such a combination of global computer network and human organic mind might really yield such astonishing abilities, and makes one yearn for the fruits thereof.

The Future According to Womack

Jack Womack's *Random Acts of Senseless Violence* takes place at an unspecified distance into the future, but (judging from the noticeable changes) it seems to be even closer than Barnes's — and, given the brutishness of life in Womack's future New York City, that's not very reassuring. This is a world on the slippery slope to oblivion, where government is helpless to enforce the law (the President is assassinated almost routinely), violence for fun and profit rules the streets, armed uprisings spread through the cities and no hope of renewal shows its face.

Random Acts of Senseless Violence is a very different sort of book, in a very different sort of future, from *Mother of Storms*. One of the striking things about Womack's future is its low-tech culture — no sign of the Internet, robot cars, briefcase supercomputers, XV, and so forth that define Barnes's world. Womack has often been likened to the cyberpunks, largely because of the gritty street feel of his previous novels, but certainly not on the basis of the role of technology in his work.

Where Barnes flips among the points of view of a variety of characters, handling them all in straightforward third-person, Womack presents his book as the diary of a twelve-year-old girl — it's all one first-person viewpoint — and he remains true to his chosen form, providing glimpses of the wider world of the future only rarely, as they creep into Lola Hart's

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entries. Womack makes no attempt to show us the big picture. Instead we get Lola's daily experience, the life of a girl in a nightmarish world of desperation, decline and hopelessness.

Perhaps because of Womack's narrower focus, the immediacy of the timeframe, and his own immersion in the voice of Lola, *Random Acts of Senseless Violence* feels much more convincing as a portrayal of real life in the future than anything in *Mother of Storms*. Barnes (and most other sf writers) focus most of their attentions on figures of power — almost every recurrent character in *Mother of Storms* plays some significant part in shaping the outcome of the catastrophe — but Womack chooses a more typical life as his subject, a life like we the readers might face in a world like his. Neither Lola nor her parents nor anyone she knows has any impact on events at the larger level, and precious little power over small-scale matters either. They're being swept away by a storm as potent as Barnes's hurricanes: the disintegration of society.

And yet, the most important factor in the verisimilitude of *Random Acts* is the way its characters respond to their environment, living their lives anyway as best they can. Some die, some run away, some drift into fantasy and denial, but all around we can see people living, as they always do even in the darkest times. They're still worrying about paying the bills, doing each other petty wrongs, having sleep-overs, going to church, falling in love. Though Womack eschews any overarching message of redemption, a thread of hope runs through *Random Acts*, an insistence that some decent people find ways to survive extreme hardships without giving themselves over entirely to violence and despair. When Lola's street friend Iz chides her for beating up a man they had robbed, saying "'you got to line the limit somewhere,'" we recognize that there can be important distinctions even in awful circumstances, and we imagine that people like Iz would be there to make the world over again if things were ever to turn around.

Womack relies on brilliant creative use of language, rather than high-tech scenery, to generate the texture of futurity in *Random Acts*. In previous novels (such as *Ambient* and *Terraplane*), his unique locutions and casually violent characters drew comparisons to Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*. Here Womack's language is even more important to his book's success, since it's in the evolving vocabulary and structure of Lola's diary that we see her changing most clearly. We first meet Lola as a privileged student at a private girls' school, still living in a comfortable

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Upper East Side apartment with her parents and sister Boob (real name Cheryl), relatively isolated from the worst of her world's decline. Her prose reflects her circumstances, clean and correct with a minimum of slang. When her family moves to a poorer neighborhood, and Lola starts spending time with local girls, she slowly adopts more and more of their streetspeak, full of shorthand word transformations ("Today I went walking starting down Broadway and fastfooting till I midtowned") and casual profanity. By the end her entries have grown fractured and confused, sometimes so compressed you need to read them twice.

Womack's social commentary is more overt and foregrounded than Barnes's — there's not really any sort of larger plot like the hurricanes in *Mother of Storms*, nothing but a vision of life in the future and the transformation of one character from sweet innocent to desperate psychotic. But Womack avoids the allegorical preachiness of other near-future novels of undisguised social criticism (*The Handmaid's Tale et al.*); he rejects simplistic philosophizing, and thereby scores a surer hit on the reader's sensibilities. He might have developed a juxtaposition showing that Lola's rich comfortable life was good and her new poverty was bad, but instead he makes it abundantly clear that the common cruelties and petty rivalries of her private school friends cause Lola more grief and heartache than the street violence of her new neighborhood. Her new friends, Iz and Jude, show much more tolerance, compassion, and plain good sense, than any of the rich kids. Yet *Random Acts* is anything but a romanticization of poverty; Womack doesn't settle for a rich-girl-finds-better-life-being-poor plot either. It's a hard, harsh life, and Iz's plain wisdom reflects the bleakness of her existence: "'If they bed together and nobody die, that's love,'" she says without irony. Life as one of the disenfranchised eventually takes Lola to the breaking point, turning her into a vicious killer. "The world brutalizes however you live it whatever you do," she writes toward the end. Womack accepts no easy political answers either. On the one hand it seems clear that a lack of government lies at the heart of the trouble, but on the other every encounter with the remaining forces of authority (police, National Guard, army) is perilous, violent and unpredictable, and every reference to the short-lived Presidents shows them unworthy of respect. Better government, law and order, may be the answer, but the existing government cannot deliver it.

What we're left with then is a situation dismayingly similar to our

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own, with no easy answers, no miraculous cures, and a downward spiral toward chaotic lawlessness that seems impossible to stop. If the newspaper hasn't already scared you enough, *Random Acts of Senseless Violence* will wake you up but good. And if you can leave this novel without the conviction that something needs to be done, and fast, to preserve what's left of what we call civilization, you've a harder heart than mine.

The Future According to Sterling

Bruce Sterling continues to ride the wave as a cyberpunk guru, lending himself (where fellow cyberpunk idol William Gibson does not) to the overexposed subculture of hackerdom, where pubescent dweebs with hot hardware (and some older dweebs as well) ply the electronic byways of the thrumming Internet. His last book, *The Hacker Crackdown* (a nonfictional look at individual rights clashing with government interference on the Net), cemented his place in the hearts and minds of hackers everywhere. So it seems a little odd at first to pick up Sterling's new novel, *Heavy Weather*, and find that it's got more in common conceptually with *Mother of Storms* than with any cyberpunk work, including Sterling's own previous books. (The surprise, however, fades after only a few pages, for reasons I'll get to presently.)

In essence, *Heavy Weather* and *Mother of Storms* start from the same idea — a catastrophic superstorm. Sterling doesn't use any precipitating event to pump his big storm up, though; here, it's just the eventual result of slow-building global warming, and there have been devastating storms ravaging the planet for years by the time the novel opens. Being from Texas, Sterling opts for tornados rather than hurricanes. But Sterling, like Barnes, posits a monster storm, bigger than anything seen before, which could harrow the planet and destroy civilization; his storm too could (according to computer weather modelers) refuse to die like a normal tornado, raging instead unchecked until it had flattened everything.

In some ways, too, Sterling's and Barnes's futures look similar on the surface. The U.N. isn't all-powerful here, but there are robot cars and ubiquitous laptops and superpowerful weather modeling computers and a busy, all-encompassing Net. But that's about as deep as the similarities go. From the very first page, we're in territory unlike that of *Mother of Storms*.

Barnes jumps right into the making of his storm, leading off with the U.N. attack that releases the methane, and he structures his novel rig-

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idly around the storm's growth, progress, depredations, and its eventual defeat. Sterling on the other hand starts somewhere off to the side, and we don't even get a complete prognosis of the deadly storm (its ferocity and possible longevity) until about halfway through the book. First we meet Alex Unger, a patient at a shady Mexican clinic, and we watch his sister Juanita ("Janey") break him out of there against his will, carrying him off to the Texas camp of the Storm Troupers, a band of self-motivated tornado enthusiasts led by Janey's lover, Dr. Jerry Mulcahey. Then we spend some time encountering several of the Troupers, observing their hip counterculture affectation (*very* alternative-lifestyle, they are), and watch them chase a storm front, studying a couple of tornadoes with virtual reality telepresence gear so that they're, like, *right there* with the storm, you dig?

Though this first half of the book tends to meander, it features some exciting storm scenes, neat tech such as the Troupe's "smart" cloth kites that fly themselves into the heart of the whirlwind, and some of Sterling's interesting offhanded speculations about the future. The best of these, the most distinctly Sterlingesque, comes about a quarter of the way in, a deceptively brief look at universal Net access. Sterling imagines hobos with laptops (so cheap are they) and access to the compressed Library of Congress holdings and other such rich databases: "...they'd crouch under a culvert with it, and peck around on it and fly around in it and read stuff and annotate it and hypertext it." But, surprisingly, Sterling doesn't emphasize the democratizing potential of such universal access to information (so common a position among the Internet crowd); instead he notes how they might just use all that information to come up with crackpot justifications for how they and their world have ended up such a mess: "It almost beat drugs for turning smart people into human wreckage."

Sterling's descriptions of storms are as interesting as Barnes's, though Sterling's are more visual and metaphorical, not as scientifically detailed and precise. Yet, as I followed the Troupe on their storm chases, I couldn't help but feel that, given the destructive potential of the storms (even the normal-sized ones, let alone the Big One), focusing on a bunch of anarchist techno-hobbyists who study the tornados for fun might be avoiding some of the bigger issues. Even if Sterling didn't want to play this book with the sort of bestseller melodrama adopted by Barnes, he needn't have ignored the tragedy and death that his storms would bring so utterly. A couple of times the issue

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comes up among the Troupers, and Jerry Mulcahey shunts it aside smoothly, explaining that there's nothing they can do to stop the storms, and nothing they can do to help the victims, so they might as well study the tornados in the hope of providing information that can help someday. It's a very cold and unconvincing justification for the aloofness of scientists.

Also, Sterling lets himself take to the soapbox once or twice too often, offering his takes on several current issues. Of course, Barnes and Womack address present-day issues more or less directly in their books, but there's a fine line between interesting commentary and interruptive editorializing. At one point, for instance, a character says, "'Must have been one of those free-trade things. When the U.S. sent all the workin' jobs down to Mexico, and the Mexicans sent the USA all their rich people.'" Sure, it's brief, but I found such bits irritating — do we really need to know how Sterling feels about NAFTA?

The greatest weakness of *Heavy Weather* is, I think, the same thing that ties it in with *The Hacker Crackdown*. Throughout the book, Sterling characterizes the Storm Troupers very much as hackers — they all use the term "to hack" for any informally acquired specialty they have, from cooking to flying the ornithopters — and his idealization of such techno-outlaws, skilled scientific adventurers operating outside the bounds of the system, comes through at every turn. *Heavy Weather* is full of the sort of anarchist frontiersman elitism that clogs hacker polemics.

Which partly explains why Sterling, far more so than Barnes, essentially ignores the normal everyday people, those who bear the brunt of the storms without any power to stop or even explain them. Sterling's Troupers show nothing but disdain for both authority figures and the run of common citizens (they call them "civilians," as though they themselves are not). Only enlightened outlaw hackers get any airtime here.

But. But. Just when you've read nearly 300 pages laced with this sort of philosophy, you come to the climactic scene, and a brief coda, which might turn these conclusions on their ear. As the big storm rages, we meet Jerry's brother Leo and his cadre of criminal behind-the-scenes manipulators, who treat people with the same disregard as Jerry does. Leo's cold appraisal of the storm's ravages is even more remote than Jerry's, and at that point we wonder if Sterling might be portraying the Troupers this way in order to expose the elitism at the heart of hackerdom and abjure it. By making Leo so similar to Jerry and yet undoubtedly evil, does Sterling

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suggest that he doesn't share the Troupers' philosophy?

And in the coda, we find Jerry and Janey in domestic comfort, he teaching, she babied, all done with the storm chasing and settled down. Alex likewise finds peace and potential marital happiness. Sterling even gives Alex a line extolling the virtues of deeper formal study of a subject as opposed to just "hacking" it. Perhaps, then, Sterling is using this book to exorcise his hacker enthusiasm, taking hacker storm chasers and settling them down in nice normal jobs and lives. The end makes the book much more complex, and made me wish there had been several more pages to expand on that new complexity.

Oh well. *Heavy Weather* is not Sterling's best book, not the book I was hoping for after such a long hiatus, but any book that can get me thinking so much gets a certain number of points from me right off. It's also got some delightful moments, some vivid and powerful images of tornados and the damage they can wreak. If you're into storm-disaster books, get this one too, but don't expect this storm to blow you away.

The Future According to McHugh

It's a little strange to turn from complaining about the overt editorializing in *Heavy Weather* to talk about Maureen F. McHugh's second novel, *Half the Day Is Night*, because my strongest objection to this book is its lack of reference to contemporary issues or trends. For a book set not much further (perhaps another decade or two) in the future than *Heavy Weather* or *Mother of Storms*, *Half the Day Is Night* remains oddly, almost willfully, devoid of the sort of social commentary that characterizes Barnes's, Womack's, and Sterling's novels.

Which is not to say that it bears no similarities at all to these other books—but the similarities are shallow and, mainly, trivial. McHugh proposes a much different scenario: in her future, several fully populated, self-contained underwater cities have been built on the seabed under the Caribbean Sea, and all of the action of *Half the Day Is Night* takes place in two of these, Julia and Marincite City. Like Womack, McHugh maintains a tight focus, offering very little information about conditions outside of these two habitats. We hear that the United States has taken to deporting immigrants, we know of at least one war in Africa in the recent past, and so on. By and large, we get a view of one small corner of the world.

The story opens with the arrival of Jean David Dai in Julia, there to take a position as personal security

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for a banking executive, Mayla Ling. David (he doesn't use the Jean) fought in that African war, and has the young veteran's disenchantment and detachment written all over him. Above all, he wants to avoid combat, so when very soon after his arrival it seems that his job might involve a lot more than staying awake at boring business functions, he wants to back out. A Marincite executive with whom Mayla had been working has been assassinated (apparently a rather common sort of event), and Mayla wants to continue to push the deal through with the man's successor. A nebulous terrorist group, *La Mano de Diós*, doesn't want the deal done, it seems, and Mayla is their next target — first she and David narrowly survive a drive-by shooting attempt in a parking garage, and then David finds a letter bomb in Mayla's mail pile, evacuating everyone from her house moments before the bomb detonates, leaving the house sealed with its watertight safety doors (which keep the rest of the colony safe from inundation).

That's enough for David, who somewhat dazedly leaves the scene and boards a bus, heading deep into the heart of Julia's poorer lower levels, planning to save up the money somehow to get out of the city and back into the upper world. But his disappearance makes him a prime suspect in the crime with the local police, so it won't be as easy as he thought. Meanwhile, Mayla pursues the deal, coaxed by her partners in Marincite into some shady smaller deals as incentive for the larger one; eventually, the pressure gets to her as well, and when she learns she might not be allowed to leave the city, she heads for the lower levels as well, to find David and try to escape with him.

If you think this sounds a bit mundane, well, you're right. This is a very surprising book, but not (I think) for the right reasons. It's very intelligent and readable, an amiable book, but about midway through it becomes increasingly clear that the next level — the plots within plots, the big showdown, whatever — is missing. What we've seen is what we've got — we don't get any better idea of *La Mano de Diós*'s motives, nor do David and Mayla discover any deep dark secrets of the underwater cities. Minor characters are all just that, none turn out to have been holding secrets or anything so exciting. McHugh's cards are all right out on the table, and it turns out she was bluffing.

I don't mean to say that *Half the Day Is Night* is a bad book — not at all. McHugh portrays the world of Julia and the other cities of Caribe with a keen eye, the plot (such as it is) moves along with energy and verve,

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and David, Mayla and many of the minor characters are portrayed with unusual sensitivity. Among sf novels, this one is rare and precious for its refreshingly polyglot, multicultural society, where voudoun rituals share space with Roman Catholic mass and racial discrimination seems uncommon. Perhaps McHugh was shooting for a Jack Vance sort of effect, where the plot might be thin and fairly straightfoward but the scenery is so odd and delightful and the characters are so charming that it doesn't matter; but if so, the world of Caribe would have to have been far stranger and more colorful for that to work. McHugh draws it with skill, maybe too much skill — her depiction of the underwater cities is so seamless that there's very little wondrousness to it, very little sense of the alien, none of that "cognitive dissonance" that sf readers prize so highly.

Which is remarkable, since we are never in doubt about the basic fact that we are in an underwater city, and that things are not the same as they are in our world. Nothing works exactly as things do for us. And yet, McHugh moves her characters through the systems of her world so smoothly that we rarely get that thrill of running headlong into something unexpected and odd. Without that, we can't get the Vancian kick.

I found myself thinking, as I finished *Half the Day Is Night*, of all the hundreds and thousands of novels (science fictional and otherwise) published over the decades, read and enjoyed by many at the time, but which have faded into obscurity with the years. Some, I suspect, would reward rediscovery. Most, however, whatever their pleasures, offered nothing so extraordinary or unusual or striking that a new novel the following year couldn't do just as good a job of keeping readers entertained. That, I think, is the case with *Half the Day Is Night*. A pleasant and engaging enough diversion, but without that extra spark or delightful twist to make it a book to reread twenty years from now.

The reason for this may bring us back to where we started. Science fiction, particularly near-future science fiction in which many of the structures and conditions of our present have been thrust forward in time, transformed perhaps but recognizable and continuous nonetheless, cannot pretend to offer real predictions of the actual future. It offers, and must admit that it offers, reflections of our own concerns in the mirrorglass of tomorrow. What if, it asks, what then? A book like Jack Womack's *Random Acts of Senseless Violence* achieves its success by emphasizing that reflective process,

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and even if circumstances change and Womack's future comes to seem less likely than it does today, his book will bear rereading as an insightful glimpse into our own past. John Barnes's *Mother of Storms* shares some of the same strength, though its thriller plot tends to hold its images of futurity at arm's length. In *Heavy Weather*, Bruce Sterling makes his commentary too direct, not so much reflecting today's concerns as speaking directly to them, and his book loses some of its force that way. Maureen McHugh's *Half the Day Is Night* is, at the last, not really about the future (and therefore not about the present) at all. It's a side trip to an interesting hypothetical place, like a day trip to a mountain ruin; perfectly pleasant, diverting, but all you can do is take a quick look, ooh and aah, then it's back on the bus and home.

Testing the speed of light in a hand-held vacuum.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Temporary Agency, Rachel Pollack, St. Martin's Press, 1994, 202pp, $18.95, Hardcover.

RACHEL Pollack's new book is set in the same world as her earlier novel *Unquenchable Fire*, a North America analogous to our own, but one in which magic works. It's divided into two parts, "Temporary Agency," which reads like an early YA novella onto which the second longer and much more adult-oriented "Benign Adjustments" has been appended. She gets away with the discrepancy in styles neatly by having the first-person narrator of both pieces look back on the earlier novella at the beginning of "Benign Adjustments" and be very aware of the ten years age difference between the teenager she was when she wrote it and the woman she is now.

"Temporary Agency" is a coming-of-age story in which fourteen-year-old Ellen Pierson, while looking for help for her cousin Paul who has fallen in love with the demonic head of a temp agency, meets her long-time hero, the famous spiritual lawyer Alison Birkett. The story unfolds in a fairly straightforward fashion and would be unremarkable except for the history it lays down which is taken up again ten years later in "Benign Adjustments."

The longer adult section is more fascinating for the interpersonal relationships than its plot. Pierson has grown into a complex individual, a woman with a career and friends, but missing something. When Birkett comes back into her life to ask for help on a case, the ensuing romantic entanglement between the two women, made more difficult because of the guilt and anger that arose out of their earlier history, is presented to us in a lovely and realistic manner.

This relationship between the two women, as well as their interactions with the secondary characters, is what gives the book its life. The other storyline — that centering

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around Birkett's case — is competent, but not nearly as intriguing. The same can be said for how Pollack describes her alternative North America. The magical rituals of day-to-day life read a little too much like a travelogue, or the work of one of those mainstream writers who depends too much upon brand names to evoke mood and description, rather than calling up the resonance one looks for in a fantasy.

I wanted to like this book better than I did. I also find myself wishing I could have suggested to Pollack that she drop the alternative world and concentrate instead on what she does best: creating characters who are so easy to believe in and care for. If she had set this novel in, say, contemporary New York, the one that exists in our world, she would have had a much more powerful novel.

The Flight of Michael McBride, Midori Snyder, Tor Books, 1994, 320pp, $21.95, Hardcover.

I've been waiting for some time for an author to come along and write this book: a story based on North American folklore that includes not only the myths and folk tales of the continent's indigenous people, but also those of some of the various immigrant peoples who followed them here, albeit many centuries later. I wanted to see Native archetypes such as Coyote mixing it up with folkloric characters from the others: Mexican, cowboy, European, African, Chinese; in other words, a real melting pot of mythic material, in the same way that the population of North American is a melting pot of human cultures.

A few years ago I thought that author would be Orson Scott Card with his Alvin Maker series, but while Card started out with a bang in *Seventh Son* (1987), he seems to have lost interest in his story since then and, two books later, has yet to finish it. Happily, Midori Snyder has taken up the slack, and done so in one stand-alone novel.

The Flight of Michael McBride doesn't include folkloric material from Africa or the Far East, but otherwise Snyder's book is just the sort of story I was hoping for, a tale that rambles from New York in the last century all the way out into the old west, ending up in the foothills of California.

It starts Irish, with the death of Michael McBride's mother and his subsequent flight from an Unseelie Court of Irish sidhe led by the malevolent Red Cap, then heads west as McBride encounters the gambling woman Poker Alice on a train bound for Chicago, rides trail on a cattle drive plagued by faerie encounters in

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Mexican guise, runs into Coyote in the desert, then the Irish goddess of war in the guise of a crow, a witch-wise refugee from the Ozark Mountains and finally, high on a mesa top, the courts of Faerie, where he gambles the lives of his friends and his mother's soul on his skill at the chess board.

Snyder takes us on an entrancing journey, dusty and gritty as riding drag on a cattle herd, but soaring high in flights of lyric fancy as well. The cast of characters is varied and individual, and their dialogue is especially well-realized, all the regional accents obvious, but never overdone. The story itself has both the ring of fairy tale and contemporary fiction, confronting moral issues in mythic terms but never straying so far from the real-world concerns that we lose sight of the characters' humanity.

While Snyder has already proven herself a gifted writer with her fantasies set in secondary worlds, she's really hit her stride in this most recent book, staking out territories that are uniquely her own. One can only hope that she will continue to be as adventurous in her subsequent novels.

Women and Ghosts, Alison Lurie, Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 1994, 179pp, $21.00, Hardcover.

In previous columns I've spoken of how much of the best fantasy appearing these days often seems to come to us from outside the genre. Part of the reason for this is that the authors don't bring along a baggage of preconceptions and history to their work, and so approach the fantastic elements of their material with a freshness that genre authors can't always muster. Unfortunately, that same lack of history can sometimes work to an outside author's detriment; without knowing what's gone before, they can blithely incorporate old clichés into their work, never realizing that we've all seen them a thousand times before.

In her new short story collection Alison Lurie occasionally falls prey to cliché, but she also redeems herself.

Mainstream readers will know Lurie from her Pulitzer Prize winning *Foreign Affairs* and her wonderful exploration of a young artist in *The Truth About Lorin Jones*. Genre readers might be more familiar with *The Oxford Book of Modern Fairy Tales* which she edited for the Oxford Press in 1993. Because of the latter, one assumes Lurie has some background in our field, but for the most part, the ghosts her women meet in *Women and Ghosts* are the sorts of spirits we've all seen before. Their appearances in the various stories, and the reasons behind their presence, are telegraphed long in advance.

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Which isn't to say that they're all old hat; some of these ghosts do have a certain creepy originality. There's the smarmy ghost of Dwayne Mudd who shows up to whisper critiques in the ear of his old girlfriend whenever she starts to get intimate with another man. The haunted antique highboy, anthropomorphized by its owner who thinks that it will stop at nothing to ensure its own health and safety. Or the fat people that a dieter keeps seeing (athough these, in all fairness, might simply be hallucinations).

But set against them are the tired revenants, variations of which we all know too well such as the child in a bunny costume haunting a woman every Halloween because while the woman wasn't directly responsible for the child's death, a case could be made for negligence upon the woman's part. The doppelgänger that is trying to take over the life of a failing poet. Or the drowned people living in the bottom of a pool that only a child can see.

What's interesting — and here is where Lurie redeems herself — is that even when her apparitions are of the tried-and-true variety, the stories still work. That's because her concern isn't so much the ghosts themselves as their effect upon her protagonists, and in this she excels. None of these stories would work without the ghosts — some work in spite of them — but each of the women we meet is an individual, not necessarily likable, but certainly believable, and their reactions to their hauntings are irresistibly fascinating.

Lurie has a real gift for capturing the nuances of her characters — especially in her first person narratives. The society women, the failing poet, the scholar, the dieter, the mother desperate for a child, all come alive within the first few paragraphs and while we might not remember the ghosts when we've put the book aside, the women, and how the ghosts changed their lives, will remain in our memory.

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Kristine Kathryn Rusch has had a busy fall. Her novels Traitors *(New American Library) and* Sins of the Blood *(Dell/Abyss) were published within two months of each other. Her work has also appeared in a wide variety of anthologies, including* The 25 Best Crime and Mystery Stories *(Carroll & Graf).*

Ever since Kris read the short story "Bernice Bobs Her Hair," she has been fascinated with the work of F. Scott Fitzgerald. She rereads The Great Gatsby *every few years, always gleaning something new from it. The following story, "The Beautiful, the Damned," was written as an hommage to Fitzgerald.*

—E.F.

The Beautiful, The Damned

By Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Chapter I

I COME FROM THE MIDDLE West, an unforgiving land with little or no tolerance for imagination. The wind blows harsh across the prairies, and the snows fall thick. Even with the conveniences of the modern age, life is dangerous there. To lose sight of reality, even for one short romantic moment, is to risk death.

I didn't belong in that country, and my grandfather knew it. I was his namesake, and somehow, being the second Nick Carraway in a family where the name had a certain mystique had forced that mystique upon me. He had lived in the East during the twenties, and had grand adventures, most of which he would not talk about. When he returned to St. Paul in 1928, he met a woman — my grandmother Nell — and with her solid, common sense had shed himself of the romance and imagination that had led to his adventures in the first place.

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Although not entirely. For when I announced, fifty years later, that I intended to pursue my education in the East, he paid four years of Ivy League tuition. And, when I told him, in the early '80s, that, despite my literary background and romantic nature, I planned a career in the securities business, he regaled me with stories of being a bond man in New York City in the years before the crash.

He died while I was still learning the art of the cold call, stuck on the sixteenth floor of a windowless high rise, in a tiny cubicle that matched a hundred other tiny cubicles, distinguished only by my handprint on the phone set and the snapshots of my family thumbtacked to the indoor-outdoor carpeting covering the small barrier that separated my cubicle from all the others. He never saw the house in Connecticut which, although it was not grand, was respectable, and he never saw my rise from a cubicle employee to a man with an office. He never saw the heady Reagan years, although he would have warned me about the awful Black Monday well before it appeared. For despite the computers, jets, and televised communications, the years of my youth were not all that different from the years of his.

He never saw Fitz either, although I knew, later that year, when I read the book, that my grandfather would have understood my mysterious neighbor too.

My house sat at the bottom of a hill, surrounded by trees whose russet leaves are — in my mind — in a state of perpetual autumn. I think the autumn melancholy comes from the overlay of hindsight upon what was, I think, the strangest summer of my life, a summer which, like my grandfather's summer of 1925, I do not discuss, even when asked. In that tiny valley, the air always had a damp chill and the rich smell of loam. The scent grew stronger upon that winding dirt path that led to Fitz's house on the hill's crest — not a house really, but more of a mansion in the conservative New England style, white walls hidden by trees, with only the wide walk and the entry visible from the gate. Once behind, the walls and windows seemed to go on forever, and the manicured lawn with its neatly mowed grass and carefully arranged marble fountains seemed like a throwback from a simpler time.

The house had little life in the daytime, but at night the windows were thrown open and cars filled the driveway. The cars were all sleek and dark — blue Saabs and midnight BMWs, black Jaguars and ebony Cararras. Occasionally a white stretch limo or a silver DeLorean would mar the darkness, but

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those guests rarely returned for a second visit, as if someone had asked them to take their ostentation elsewhere. Music trickled down the hill with the light, usually music of a vanished era, waltzes and marches and Dixieland Jazz, music both romantic and danceable, played to such perfection that I envied Fitz his sound system until I saw several of the better known New York Philharmonic members round the corner near my house early on a particular Saturday evening.

Laughter, conversation, and the tinkle of ice against fine crystal filled the gaps during the musicians' break, and in those early days, as I sat on my porch swing and stared up at the light, I imagined parties like those I had only seen on film — slender beautiful women in glittery gowns, and athletic men who wore tuxedos like a second skin, exchanging witty and wry conversation under a dying moon.

In those early days, I didn't trudge up the hill, although later I learned I could have, and drop into a perpetual party that never seemed to have a guest list. I still had enough of my Midwestern politeness to wait for an invitation and enough of my practical Midwestern heritage to know that such an invitation would never come.

Air conditioners have done little to change Manhattan in the summer. If anything, the heat from their exhausts adds to the oppression in the air, the stench of garbage rotting on the sidewalks, and the smell of sweaty human bodies pressed too close. Had my cousin Arielle not discovered me, I might have spent the summer in the cool loam of my Connecticut home, monitoring the markets through my personal computer, and watching Fitz's parties with a phone wedged between my shoulder and ear.

Arielle always had an ethereal, other-worldly quality. My sensible aunt, with her thick ankles and dish-water blonde hair, must have recognized that quality in the newborn she had given birth to in New Orleans, and committed the only romantic act of her life by deciding that Arielle was not a Mary or a Louise, family names that had suited Carraways until then.

I had never known Arielle well. At family reunions held on the shores of Lake Superior, she was always a beautiful, unattainable ghost, dressed in white gauze, with silver blonde hair that fell to her waist, wide blue eyes, and skin so pale it seemed as fragile as my mother's bone china. We had exchanged perhaps five words over all those reunions, held each July, and always I had

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bowed my head and stammered in the presence of such royalty. Her voice was sultry and musical, lacking the long "a"s and soft "d"s that made my other relations sound like all their years of education had made no impression at all.

Why she called me when she and her husband Tom discovered that I had bought a house in a village only a mile from theirs I will never know. Perhaps she was lonely for a bit of family, or perhaps the other-worldliness had absorbed her, even then.

CHAPTER II

I DROVE TO Arielle and Tom's house in my own car, a BMW, navy blue and spit-polished, bought used because all of my savings had gone into the house. They lived on a knoll in a mock-Tudor style house surrounded by young saplings that had obviously been transplanted. The lack of tall trees gave the house a vulnerable air, as if the neighbors who lived on higher hills could look down upon it and find it flawed. The house itself was twice the size of mine, with a central living area flanked by a master bedroom wing and a guest wing, the wings more of an architect's affectation than anything else.

Tom met me at the door. He was a beefy man in his late twenties whose athletic build was beginning to show signs of softening into fat. He still had the thick neck, square jaw and massive shoulders of an offensive lineman which, of course, he had been. After one season with the Green Bay Packers —in a year unremarked for its lackluster performance— he was permanently sidelined by a knee injury. Not wanting to open a car dealership that would forever capitalize on his one season of glory, he took his wife and his inheritance and moved east. When he saw me, he clapped his hand on my back as if we were old friends when, in fact, we had only met once, at the last and least of the family reunions.

"Ari's been waiting ta see ya," he said, and the broad flat uneducated vowels of the Midwest brought with them the sense of the stifling summer afternoons of the reunions, children's laughter echoing over the waves of the lake as if their joy would last forever.

He led me through a dark foyer and into a room filled with light. Nothing in the front of the house had prepared me for this room, with its floor-to-ceiling windows, and their view of an English garden beyond the patio. Arielle

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sat on a loveseat beneath the large windows, the sunlight reflecting off her hair and white dress, giving her a radiance that was almost angelic. She held out her hand, and as I took it, she pulled me close and kissed me on the cheek.

"Nicky," she murmured. "I missed you."

The softness with which she spoke, the utter sincerity in her gaze made me believe her and, as on those summer days of old, I blushed.

"Not much ta do in Connecticut." Tom's booming voice made me draw back. "We been counting the nails on the walls."

"Now, Tom," Ari said without taking her hand from mine, "we belong here."

I placed my other hand over hers, capturing the fragile fingers for a moment, before releasing her. "I rather like the quiet," I said.

"You would," Tom said. He turned and strode across the hardwood floor, always in shadow despite the light pouring in from the windows.

His abruptness took me aback, and I glanced at Ari. She shrugged. "I think we'll eat on the terrace. The garden is cool this time of day."

"Will Tom join us?"

She frowned in a girlish way, furrowing her brow, and making her appear, for a moment, as if she were about to cry. "He will when he gets off the phone."

I hadn't heard a phone ring, but I had no chance to ask her any more for she placed her slippered feet on the floor and stood. I had forgotten how tiny she was, nearly half my height, but each feature perfectly proportioned. She took my arm and I caught the fresh scent of lemons rising from her warm skin.

"You must tell me everything that's happened to you," she said, and I did. Under her intense gaze my life felt important, my smallest accomplishments a pinnacle of achievement. We had reached the terrace before I had finished. A glass table, already set for three, stood in the shade of a maple tree. The garden spread before us, lush and green. Each plant had felt the touch of a pruning shears and was trimmed back so severely that nothing was left to chance.

I pulled out a chair for Ari and she sat daintily, her movements precise. I took the chair across from her, feeling cloddish, afraid that my very size would cause me to break something. I wondered how Tom, with his linebacker's build, felt as he moved through his wife's delicate house.

She shook out a linen napkin and placed it on her lap. A man appeared

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beside her dressed as a waiter—he had moved so silently that I hadn't noticed him—and poured water into our crystal glasses. He filled Tom's as well, and Ari stared at the empty place.

"I wish he wouldn't call her before lunch," she said. "It disturbs my digestion."

I didn't want to ask what Ari was referring to. I didn't want to get trapped in their private lives.

She sighed and brushed a strand of hair out of her face. "But I don't want to talk about Tom's awful woman. I understand you live next door to the man they call Fitz."

I nodded as the waiter appeared again, bringing fresh bread in a ceramic basket.

"I would love," she said, leaning forward just enough to let me know this was the real reason behind my invitation, "to see the inside of his home."

Tom never joined us. We finished our lunch, walked through the garden, and had mint juleps in the late afternoon, after which everything seemed a bit funnier than it had before. As I left in the approaching twilight, it felt as if Ari and I had been friends instead of acquaintances linked by a happenstance of birth.

By the time I got home, it was dark. The house retained the heat of the day, and so I went into the back yard and stared at the path that led up to Fitz's mansion. The lights blazed on the hillside, and the sound of laughter washed down to me like the blessing of a god. Perhaps Ari's casual suggestion put something in my mind, or perhaps I was still feeling the effects of the mint juleps, but whatever the cause, I walked up the path, feeling drawn to the house like a moth to light.

My shoes crunched against the hard-packed earth, and my legs, unused to such strenuous exercise, began to ache. Midway up, the coolness of the valley had disappeared, and perspiration made my shirt cling to my chest. The laughter grew closer, and with it, snatches of conversation—women's voices rising with passion, men speaking in low tones, pretending that they couldn't be overheard.

I stopped at a small rock formation just before the final rise to Fitz's house. The rocks extended over the valley below like a platform, and from them, I could see the winding road I had driven that afternoon to Ari's house.

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A car passed below and I followed the trail of its headlights until they disappeared into the trees.

As I turned to leave the platform, my desire to reach the party gone, I caught a glimpse of a figure moving against the edge of the path. A man stood on the top of the rise, staring down at the road, as I had. He wore dark evening dress with a white shirt and a matching white scarf draped casually around his neck. The light against his back caused his features to be in shadow — only when he cupped his hands around a burning match to light a cigarette already in his mouth did I get a sense of his face.

He had an older beauty — clean-shaven, almost womanish, with a long nose, high cheekbones and wide, dark eyes. A kind of beauty that had been fashionable in men when my grandfather was young — the Rudolph Valentino, Leslie Howard look that seemed almost effete by the standards of today.

As he tossed the match away, a waltz started playing behind him, and it gave him context. He stared down at the only other visible point of light — Ari's knoll — and his posture suggested such longing that I half expected the music to swell, to add too much violin in the suggestion of a world half-forgotten.

I knew, without being told, that this was my neighbor. I almost called to him, but felt that to do so would ruin the perfection of the moment. He stared until he finished his cigarette, then dropped it, ground it with his shoe, and, slipping his hands in his pockets, wandered back to the party — alone.

Chapter III

THE NEXT afternoon I was lounging on my sofa with the air conditioning off, lingering over the book review section of the Sunday Times, when the crunch of gravel through the open window alerted me to a car in my driveway. I stood up in time to see a black Rolls Royce stop outside my garage. The driver's door opened, and a chauffeur got out, wearing, unbelievably, a uniform complete with driving cap. He walked up to the door, and I watched him as though he were a ghost. He clasped one hand behind his back and, with the other, rang the bell.

The chimes pulled me from my stupor. I opened the door, feeling ridiculously informal in my polo shirt and my stocking feet. The chauffeur

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didn't seem to notice. He handed me a white invitation embossed in gold and said, "Mr. Fitzgerald would like the pleasure of your company at his festivities this evening."

I stammered something to the effect that I would be honored. The chauffeur nodded and returned to the Rolls, backing it out of the driveway with an ease that suggested years of familiarity. I watched until he disappeared up the hill. Then I took the invitation inside and stared at it, thinking that for once, my Midwestern instincts had proven incorrect.

The parties began at sundown. In the late afternoon, I would watch automobiles with words painted on their sides climb the winding road to Fitz's mansion. *Apple Valley Caterers. Signal Wood Decorators.* Musicians of all stripes, and extra service personnel, preparing for an evening of work that would last long past dawn. By the time I walked up the hill, the sun had set and the lights strung on the trees and around the frame of the house sent a glow bright as daylight down the walk to greet me.

Cars still drove past — the sleek models this time — drivers often visible, but the occupants hidden by shaded windows. As I trudged, my face heated. I looked like a schoolboy, prowling the edges of an adult gathering at which he did not belong.

By the time I arrived, people flowed in and out of the house like moths chasing the biggest light. The women wore their hair short or up, showing off cleavage and dresses so thin that they appeared to be gauze. Most of the men wore evening clothes, some of other eras, long-waisted jackets complete with tails and spats. One man stood under the fake gaslight beside the door, his skin so pale it looked bloodless, his hair slicked back like a thirties gangster's, his eyes hollow dark points in his empty face. He supervised the attendants parking the cars, giving directions with the flick of a bejeweled right hand. When he saw me, he nodded as if I were expected, and inclined his head toward the door.

I flitted through. A blonde woman, her hair in a marcel, gripped my arm as if we had come together, her bow-shaped lips painted a dark wine red. The crowd parted for us, and she said nothing, just squeezed my arm, and then disappeared up a flight of stairs to the right.

It was impossible to judge the house's size or decor. People littered its hallways, sprawled along its stairs. Waiters, carrying trays of champagne

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aloft, slipped through the crowd. Tables heaped in ice and covered in food lined the walls. The orchestra played on the patio, and couples waltzed around the pool. Some of the people had a glossy aura, as if they were photographs come to life. I recognized a few faces from the jumble of Wall Street, others from the occasional evening at the Met, but saw no one I knew well enough to speak to, no one with whom to have even a casual conversation.

When I arrived, I made an attempt to find my host, but the two or three people of whom I asked his whereabouts stared at me in such an amazed way, and denied so vehemently any knowledge of his movements that I slunk off in the direction of the open bar — the only place on the patio where a single man could linger without looking purposeless and alone.

I ordered a vodka martini although I rarely drank hard liquor — it seemed appropriate to the mood — and watched the crowd's mood switch as the orchestra slid from the waltz to a jitterbug. Women dressed like flappers, wearing no-waisted fringed dresses and pearls down to their thighs, danced with an abandon I had only seen in movies. Men matched their movements, sweat marring the perfection of their tailored suits.

A hand gripped my shoulder, the feeling tight but friendly, unlike Tom's clap of the week before. As I looked up, I realized that the crowd of single men around the bar had eased, and I was standing alone, except for the bartender and the man behind me.

Up close, he was taller and more slender than he had looked in the moonlight. His cheekbones were high, his lips thin, his eyes hooded. "Your face looks familiar," he said. "Perhaps you're related to the Carraways of St. Paul, Minnesota."

"Yes," I said. The drink had left an unpleasant tang on my tongue. "I grew up there."

"And Nick Carraway, the bondsman, would be your — grandfather? Great-grandfather?"

That he knew my grandfather startled me. Fitz looked younger than that, more of an age with me. Perhaps there were family ties I did not know about. "Grandfather," I said.

"Odd," he murmured. "How odd, the way things grow beyond you."

He had kept his hand on my shoulder, making it impossible to see more than half of his face. "I wanted to thank you for inviting me," I said.

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"It would be churlish not to," he said. "Perhaps, in the future, we'll actually be able to talk."

He let go of my shoulder. I could still feel the imprint of his hand as he walked away. He had an air of invisibleness to him, a way of moving unnoticed through a crowd. When he reached the edge of the dancers, he stopped and looked at me with a gaze piercing with its intensity.

"Next time, old sport," he said, the old-fashioned endearment tripping off his tongue like a new and original phrase, "bring your cousin. I think she might like the light."

At least, that was what I thought he said. Later, when I had time to reflect, I wondered if he hadn't said, "I think she might like the night."

Chapter IV

MEN WITH little imagination often have a clarity of vision that startles the mind. For all their inability to imagine beauty, they seem able to see the ugliness that lies below any surface. They have a willingness to believe in the baser, cruder side of life.

On the following Wednesday afternoon, I found myself in a bar at the edge of the financial district, a place where men in suits rarely showed their faces, where the average clientele had muscles thick as cue balls and just as hard. Tom had corralled me as I left the office, claiming he wanted to play pool and that he knew a place, but as we walked in, it became clear that we were not there for a game, but for an alibi.

The woman he met was the antithesis of Ari. She was tall, big-chested, with thick ankles, more a child of my aunt than Ari ever could be. The woman — Rita — wore her clothes like an ill-fitting bathrobe, slipping to one side to reveal a mound of flesh and a bit of nipple. Lipstick stained the side of her mouth and the edges of her teeth. She laughed loud and hard, like a man, and her eyes were bright with too much drink. She and Tom disappeared into the back, and I remained, forgotten, in the smoky haze.

I stuck my tie in my pocket, pulled off my suitjacket and draped it over a chair, rolling up my sleeves before I challenged one of the large men in a ripped T-shirt to a game of eight-ball. I lost fifty dollars to him before he decided there was no challenge in it; by then Tom and Rita had reappeared,

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her clothing straight and her lipstick neatly applied.

Tom clapped my back before I could step away, and the odors of sweat, musk and newly applied cologne swept over me. "Thanks, man," he said, as if my accompanying him on this trip had deepened our friendship.

I could not let the moment slide without exacting my price. "My neighbor asked that Ari come to one of his parties this week."

Rita slunk back as if Ari's name lessened Rita's power. Tom stepped away from me.

"Fitzgerald's a ghoul," he said. "They say people go ta his house and never come back."

"I was there on Sunday."

"You're lucky ta get out alive."

"Hundreds of people go each night." I unrolled my sleeves, buttoned them, and then slipped into my suitcoat. "I plan to take Ari."

Tom stared at me for a moment, the male camaraderie gone. Finally he nodded, the acknowledgment of a price paid.

"Next time you go," Rita said, addressing the only words she would ever say to me, "take a good look at his guests."

I drove Ari up in my car. Even though I spent the afternoon washing and polishing it, the car's age showed against the sleek new models, something in the lack of shine of the bumpers, the crude design of a model year now done. The attendant was polite as he took my place, but lacked the enthusiasm he had shown over a Rolls just moments before.

Ari stared at the house, her tiny mouth agape, her eyes wide. The lights reflected in her pupils like a hundred dancing stars. She left my side immediately and ran up the stairs as if I were not even there.

I tipped the attendant and strode in, remembering Rita's admonishment. The faces that looked familiar had a photographic edge to them — the patina of images I had seen a thousand times in books, in magazines, on film. But as I scanned, I could not see Ari. It was as if she had come into the mammoth house and vanished.

I grabbed a flute of champagne from a passing waiter and wandered onto the patio. The orchestra was playing "Alexander's Ragtime Band" and the woman with the marcel danced in the center, alone, as if she were the only one who understood the music.

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Beside me, a burly man with dark hair and a mustache that absorbed his upper lip spoke of marlin fishing as if it were a combat sport. A lanky and lean man who spoke with a Mississippi accent told a familiar story about a barn-burning to a crowd of women who gazed adoringly at his face. Behind him, a tiny woman with an acid tongue talked in disparaging terms of the Algonquin, and another man with white hair, a face crinkled from too much drink, and a body so thin it appeared dapper, studied the edges of the conversation as if the words were written in front of him.

They all had skin as pale as Fitz's, and a life force that seemed to have more energy than substance.

There were others scattered among the crowd: a man with an unruly shock of white hair who spoke of his boyhood in Illinois, his cats, and the workings of riverboats powered by steam; the demure brown-haired woman wearing a long white dress, standing in a corner, refusing to meet anyone's gaze. "She's a poet," a young girl beside me whispered, and I nodded, recognizing the heart-shaped face, the quiet, steady eyes.

In that house, on that night, I never questioned their presence, as if being in the company of people long dead were as natural as speaking to myself. I avoided them: they had nothing to do with me. I was drawn to none of them, except, perhaps, Fitz himself.

He was as invisible as Ari. I wandered through the manse three times, pushing past bodies flushed from dancing, bright with too much drink, letting the conversation flow over me like water over a stone. Most of my colleagues spoke of Fitz himself, how he had favored them in one way or another, with a commission or, in the case of the women, with time alone. They spoke with a sigh, their eyes a bit glazed, as if the memory were more of a dream, and as they spoke, they touched their throats, or played with pearl chokers around their necks. A shudder ran through me and I wondered what I had brought Arielle into.

I found her at 3 A.M., waltzing in the empty grand ballroom with Fitz. He wore an ice cream suit, perfectly tailored, his hair combed back, and she wore a white gown that rippled around her like her hair. She gazed at him like a lover, her lips parted and moist, her body pressed against his, and as they whirled to the imaginary music, I caught glimpses of his face, his brows brought together in concentration, his eyes sparkling and moist. He looked like a man caught in a dream from which he could not wake, a dream which

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had gone bad, a dream which, when he remembered it, he would term a nightmare.

Then she saw me, and her expression changed. "Nick," she said. "Nick Carraway." And she laughed. The voice was not hers. It had more music than before, but beneath it, a rasp older women gained from too many cigarettes, too much drink. "He will never leave us alone, Scott."

Fitz looked at me. If anything, he appeared paler than he had before. The sparkle in his eyes was not tears, but the hard glare of a man who could not cry. "Thanks for all your help, old man," he said, and with that I knew I had been dismissed.

Chapter V

BOUT A week before, an ambitious young reporter appeared on Fitz's doorstep as one of the parties began. He managed to find Fitz at the edge of the pool and asked him if he had anything to say.

"About what?" Fitz asked.

"About anything."

It transpired after a few minutes that the young man had heard Fitz's name around the office in a connection he wouldn't or couldn't reveal and, it being his day off, had hurried out to Connecticut "to see."

It was a random shot and yet the reporter's instinct had been right. Fitz's reputation, as spread by the people who saw him, the people who came to his gatherings, had that summer fallen just short of news. Stories of his mysterious past persisted, and yet none came close to the truth.

You see, he did not die of a heart attack in 1940. Instead he fell in, as he later said, with the ghouls of the Hollywood crowd. Obsessed with immortality, glamor and youth, they convinced him to meet a friend, a person whose name remains forever elusive. He succumbed to the temptation, as he had so often before, and discovered only after he had changed that in giving up life he had given up living and that the needs which drove his fiction disappeared with his need for food and strong drink.

He watched his daughter from afar and occasionally brought others into the fold, as the loneliness ate at him. He began throwing large parties and in them found sustenance, and others like him who had managed to move from

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human fame into a sort of shadowed, mythical existence. But the loneliness did not abate, and over time he learned that he had only one more chance, another opportunity to make things right. And so he monitored the baby wards in the South, allowing his own brush with the supernatural to let him see when her soul returned. For his love affair with her was more haunting and tragic than those he wrote about, and he hoped, with his new understanding, that he could make amends.

Some of this I learned, and some of this he told me. I put it down here as a way of noting that the rumors about him weren't even close to the truth, that the truth is, in fact, as strange as fiction, and I would not believe it if I had not seen it with my own eyes. What he did tell me he said at a time of great confusion, and I might not have believed him, even then, if later that year, I hadn't found the books, the novels, the biographies, that somehow even with my literary education, I had managed to overlook.

That night, I did not sleep. The phone rang three times, and all three times, the machine picked up. Tom's coarse accent echoed in the darkness of my bedroom, demanding to know why Ari had not returned home. Finally I slipped on a faded pair of jeans and loafers, and padded up the hill to see if I could convince her to leave before Tom created trouble.

Only the light in the ballroom remained on, casting a thin glow across the yard. The cars were gone as were their occupants. Discarded cigarette butts, broken champagne glasses, and one woman's shoe with the heel missing were the only evidence of the gaiety that had marked the evening. Inside, I heard Ari sobbing hysterically, and as I walked up the steps, a hand pushed against my chest.

I hadn't seen him in the dark. He had been sitting on the steps, staring at the detritus in the driveway, an unlit cigarette in his hands. "You can't help her," he said, and in his voice, I heard the weariness of a man whose dreams were lost.

Still, I pushed past him and went inside. Ari sat on the floor, her bare feet splayed in front of her, her dress still the white of pure snow. When she saw me, the crying stopped. "Nicky," she said in that raspy, not-her voice, and then the laughter started, as uncontrolled as the crying. I went to her, put my arm around her shoulder and tried to lift her up. She shook her head and pulled out of my grasp. For a moment, the horrible laughter

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stopped and she gazed up at me, her eyes as clear as the sky on a summer morning. "You don't understand, do you?" she asked. "When I'm here, this is where I belong."

Then the laughter began again, a harsh, almost childish sound too close to tears. Fitz glided past me, still wearing the white suit he had worn earlier. He picked her up and shushed her, and she buried her face against his shoulder as if he gave her strength.

Her thin, fragile neck was clear and unmarked. God help me, I checked. But he had not touched her, at least in that way.

He carried her to the plush sofa pushed back to the wall beneath the windows. Then he pushed the hair off her face, wiped the tears from her cheeks, and whispered to her, hauntingly: sleep. Her eyes closed and her breathing evened, and once again she was the Arielle I had always known, pink-cheeked and delicate.

He looked at me, and said, "This is why Daisy had to leave Gatsby, because he was wrong for her. The better part of me knew that being with me shattered her spirit. But we are not Daisy and Gatsby, and I could not let her go. You knew that, didn't you, old man? That I could not let her go?"

But I didn't know, and I didn't understand until much later. So I remained quiet. Wisely, as it turned out.

"Ah, Nick," he said, his fingers brushing her brow. "Your arrival surprised me. I never thought — I never realized — how the characters live on, even when the story's over. I could believe in my own transformation but not your existence. And I never understood the past, so here I am repeating it."

He smiled then, a self-deprecating smile that made all his words seem like the foolish ravings of a man who had had little sleep. And yet he continued, telling me some of the things of which I have already written, and others, which I shall never commit to the page.

"Go home, old sport," he finally said. "Everything will look different in the light of day."

I must have glanced at Arielle with concern, for he cupped her cheek possessively. "Don't worry," he said. "I'll take good care of her."

Something in the throb of his voice made me trust him, made me turn on my heel even though I knew it was wrong, and leave him there with

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her. Some warble, some imperative moved me, as if he were the creator and I the created. I wandered down the hill in the dark, and didn't return until the light of day.

CHAPTER VI

I HAD SLEPT maybe twenty minutes when I woke to the sound of tires peeling on the road outside my house. An engine raced, powering a fast-moving car up the hill. As I sat up, brakes squealed and a voice rose in a shout that echoed down the valley. The shouts continued until they ended abruptly — mid-sentence — followed by a moment of silence and a woman's high pitched scream.

It was still dark, although the darkness had that gray edge that meant dawn wasn't far away. I picked up the phone and called the police which, in my compulsion fogged mind, felt like an act of defiance. Then I rose from my bed a second time, dressed, and ran out of the house.

I didn't think to take the car until I was half way up the path. By then to run back and get it would have taken twice as long as continuing. The sun rose, casting orange and gold tendrils across the sky. The silence in Fitz's house unnerved me and I was shaking by the time I reached the driveway.

I had never seen the car before — a light gray sedan that lacked pretension — but the Wisconsin vanity plate made its ownership clear. It had parked on the shattered glasses. A woman's black glove lay beneath one of the tires. In the early morning glow, Fitz's manse seemed ancient and old: the lawn filled with bottles and cans from the night before; the shutters closed and unpainted; the steps cracked and littered with ashes and gum. The door stood open and I slipped inside, careful to touch nothing.

A great gout of blood rose in an arch along one wall and dripped to the tile below. Drops led me to the open French doors. Through them, I saw the pool.

Tiny waves still rippled the water. The laden air mattress moved irregularly along the surface. The man's eyes were open and appeared to frown in confusion, his skin chalk-white, and his neck a gaping hole that had been licked clean of blood.

Of Ari and Fitz we never found a trace. A man who had lived on the fringes as long as he had knew how to disappear. I had half hoped for an

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acknowledgment — a postcard, a fax, a phone message — something that recognized the dilemma he had put me in. But, as he said, an author never realizes that the characters live beyond the story, and I suspect he never gave me a second thought.

Although I thought of him as I read the articles, the biographies, the essays and dissertations based on his life — his true life. I saved his novels for last and his most famous for last of all. And in it, I heard my grandfather's voice, and understood why he never spoke of his life before he returned from the East all those years ago. For that life had not been his but a fiction created by a man my grandfather had never met. My grandfather's life began in 1925 and he lived it fully until the day he died.

I sold the house at the bottom of the hill, and moved back to the Middle West. I found that I prefer the land harsh and the winds of reality cold against my face. It reminds me that I am alive. And, although I bear my grandfather's name in a family where that name has a certain mystique, that mystique does not belong to me. Nor must I hold it hallowed against my breast. The current my grandfather saw drawing him into the past pushes me toward the future, and I shall follow it with an understanding of what has come before.

For, although we are all created by someone, that someone does not own us. We pick our own paths. To do anything else condemns us to a glittering world of all night parties hosted by Fitz and his friends, the beautiful and the damned.

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Multiple Hugo winner Mike Resnick is the author of Ivory, Inferno, Soothsayer, *and the Kirinyaga stories (which have been collected in* Will the Last Person to Leave the Planet Please Shut off the Sun? *from Tor Books). Campbell nominee Nicholas A. DiChario is the author of the Hugo and World Fantasy nominee "The Winterberry." Mike and Nick have collaborated before, most notably with "Birdie" in our May 1994 issue.*

"Working Stiff" will appear in The Book of Kings, *edited by Richard Gilliam, and is about the most unlikely king the authors could come up with.*

Working Stiff

By Mike Resnick & Nicholas A. DiChario

I'M THE BEST BUS DRIVER on the downtown line, and damned proud of it. I take the wide turn around East Elm Street — trickiest corner on my whole route — feeling the tires slide across a patch of early-morning slush, and then skid to a stop right in front of the station. Twelve midnight. Right on schedule. I've always been a good schedule driver. And no one's got quicker reflexes.

There's still one passenger aboard. I open the door and the bitter cold air whisks down the aisle. Winter in upstate New York comes in hard and fast off Lake Ontario. Sometimes it hits as early as September and sticks around till May. Not exactly the kind of weather I grew up with back on the island, but I always hated tropical heat.

I turn around and this guy is still sitting on his duff. "End of the line, Mister," I announce.

The guy walks up slowly from the rear, then sits in that first seat opposite me. He's a short, chunky guy. Glasses. Neatly trimmed beard. Shirt and tie

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under a fancy overcoat. Nice boots. Not the kind of guy you'd normally see on my line, so I've got a pretty good idea as to what's coming next. By now I can sense when one of these jokers has come looking for a story.

"Mind if we have a chat?" he says, sweet as pie. "I'm from *New York Silver Screen Magazine.*"

I shrug. "Why not?"

I crawl out of the driver's seat, and the two of us walk through the gathering snow into the bus terminal. "Wait here," I tell him. He sits on a bench in front of the tall Plexiglas windows facing South Avenue, and I go to the supervisor's station to clock off my shift, half-expecting him not to be there when I get back. Some of them don't wait. Some of them, the brighter ones, can tell right off they're not going to get the story they came hunting for.

Not this guy, though: he's still waiting. He gives me a fake smile and says, "How's about I buy you some breakfast?"

"Thanks, but no thanks," I answer. "I got some errands to run. You're welcome to tag along." I turn my back on him and head for the street. He follows.

"You know, you're not exactly what I expected," he says thoughtfully.

I sigh. "You mean I'm not as big as you expected."

He nods. "Right."

That's the first thing that strikes most of them. I'm pretty big, but they always expect bigger. *Much* bigger.

We step outdoors into the cold black morning. I start walking. I walk everywhere, or take the bus. I'm too large to fit comfortably in a car. I tried a sleek little Mazda RX-7 once; three years old, 47,000 miles, drove like a dream — but it always felt like I was about to swallow my knees.

I figure the wind-chill has dropped the temperature to three or four degrees below zero. Maybe I can shake this guy yet. After all, *he* doesn't have a fur coat. Me, I live in mine.

"Why only one film?" he says. I grimace. These journalists are so predictable. They'll ask one question, maybe two, about me, and then, inevitably, they'll ask about *her*. "Don't you miss her? What did she mean to you? What do you remember most about her? Do you still talk to her?"

So I state the obvious. "There's not a lot of opportunity for a guy like me in Hollywood. I'm not exactly your typical leading man, you know?"

We walk into this tavern on Alexander Street, brush off the snow and

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sleet, and take a couple of stools at the bar.

Vinnie the bartender comes right over. "What can I do for you boys?"

I pull a wad of bills out of my jacket pocket and start peeling off twenties. "What's the line on the Bengals and the Jets?"

Vinnie looks at my friend.

"He's okay," I tell him.

"What's his name?"

"I don't know. What's your name?"

The guy looks ill at ease. I can't say as I blame him. "Parker Granwell," he says, extending his hand to Vinnie. "It's a pleasure to meet you, sir."

Vinnie snickers. He's got this kind of wheezing emphysema laugh. He was shot in the ribs a few years back. The bullet left him with an air leak and a limp, as if he's got a permanent stitch in his side. "Where'd you find this nerd?"

"He found me," I answer. "What's the line?"

"Minus two," says Vinnie.

"Under-over?" I ask.

"Thirty-eight."

"What about the Dolphins and the Bills?"

"Miami plus six-and-a-half. Forty-two."

"I'll take the Dolphs and over for a hundred, and the Bengals and under for forty...no...make it sixty."

Vinnie takes my money. "What about the nerd? Care to place a wager?"

"I'll pass," says Parker, fidgeting on his bar stool.

Vinnie chuckles. "Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Parker Granwell, sir" — he makes it sound like a title — and limps into the back room.

I nod toward the door. "Let's go." We enter the storm again. Granwell seems like a decent enough guy, and I figure I might as well give him what he wants. So as we walk, I talk about the good old days, the days of Mary Pickford and Doug Fairbanks and Scott Fitzgerald, the days of Gable, Harlow, and Cagney, the glory days of Universal, Paramount, Warner Brothers, MGM, and of course RKO, the days before the Screen Actors Guild destroyed something so pure and simple as the studio contract. I even throw in some trite quotable stuff about Willis O'Brien's brilliant animation and Max Steiner's under-appreciated musical score and Merian Cooper's genius. What the hell, it was all true; I just never cared.

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Anyway, Granwell nods and takes some notes and throws in a "Yeah — uh-huh — okay" every now and again, and when it's all over he tucks his notebook in his coat pocket and frowns, the snow gathering in his neat beard.

"I do believe that is the longest line of bullshit I have ever heard," he says.

"I've had a lot of practice," I reply without missing a beat.

"I want the truth."

He's right, of course, about the bullshit. But he's wrong about the truth. He doesn't really want it. None of them ever do.

We stop at the Cork Screw, a liquor store about the size of a meat freezer over on Chestnut Street. Max closes at midnight but he's always in the back room till around two or three, counting receipts, punching figures into his adding machine, and drinking away his profits. I like Max. We've spent many an evening together talking football and getting drunk. He's one of the few people in the world who has never seen the movie, and has no desire to.

I rap on the back door. Max opens up and asks me in.

"Sorry, Maxy," I greet him. "I can't stay tonight. I got company I can't get rid of."

Max peeks out the door and shows the barrel-end of his Remington twelve-gauge. "I'll bet *I* can get rid of your company for you."

I see Granwell go a little pale. This is more than he bargained for. He was probably looking for an easy piece of back-page fluff, not a tour of the inner city in sub-zero weather, complete with gangsters and sawed-off shotguns. "That's all right, Maxy, he's okay. You got any overstock tonight?" I peel off another twenty and, as usual, Max won't take it. He hands me a bottle of Canadian Club — not my favorite, but well worth the price — and Granwell and I make our way down Chestnut, through the windy spray of sleet and snow, to the trucking warehouse where I rent my living space.

I push through the heavy doors, click on the overhead light bulb, and invite him in. What the hell. I'm always hoping that one of these guys, one of these days, will print the truth. The *Truth*. Your king lives in a warehouse surrounded by banana crates, and sleeps on two king-size mattresses thrown on top of a concrete floor. Your king is a bus-driver who gambles and drinks away his paycheck. Your king never wanted his goddamned crown, and if he regrets one thing in his life, it's that he took the role that made him king, that he died on-screen for the love of a flat-chested wig-wearing blonde, and that the world can't forget about it.

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And neither can he.

Suddenly, the Canadian Club doesn't appeal to me. I need a beer. I open my fridge, crack open a Bud, and offer one to Granwell. Much to my surprise, he accepts.

"You know," he says, "rumor has it that your movie saved RKO. They were ready to file for bankruptcy when — "

"Yeah, it's true. But let's get one thing straight. It's not *my* movie."

"Without you, there *is* no movie." He sits on a banana crate and sips his Bud. "In 1975, the American Film Institute honored it as one of the favorite American films of all time. There was even a reception at the White House."

"You got guts, Parker Granwell," I say, guzzling my beer and crushing the can. "You want honesty? I like being a bus driver. I like to gamble and I like to drink. I like my friends and my life. Why not let it go at that?"

"I don't get it. Why did you leave the island if you didn't want to be king?"

I can't help but laugh at that one. How could I have known back in 1933 what I was getting myself into? I was just a big kid. So I tell him the truth, just like I tell all the others: "I *hated* that damned island. The heat, the gigantic insects, the carnivorous spiders, snakes a mile long, vultures the size of airplanes, the tyrannosaurus always hunting me. I had to fight the pterodactyls and pteranodons for every scrap of food. I was allergic to more plant-life on that goddamned island than you can find on this whole fucking continent. And the natives were the worst of the lot: they'd sacrifice virgins to me one minute and chuck spears at me the next. How long do you think I could have survived in that environment?"

I take a deep breath and continue. "I needed a change, and quick — but the problem was getting off the island. I couldn't swim. (Still can't.) Anyway, I hear through the grapevine that this guy Merian Cooper is vacationing on the island and he's putting together this film in the States and it just so happens he needs an ape, so I go looking for him. Once he calms down he gives me this mock screen test and he likes what he sees. The rest is history."

"How did you get so small? I mean, you were *huge* — forty, fifty feet tall at least."

I shrug, go to the fridge, crack open another Bud. "That one's a mystery to me," I admit. "But I have a theory. I think the universe has to be in a kind of balance. Over the years, as the myth grew bigger, I got smaller. It's as if there's not enough room for both of us in this world: it can accommodate

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either me or the myth — and the myth is a hell of a lot stronger than I am."

Granwell looks like he's mulling it over, then apparently decides to let it go. "I'd like to read you something," he says. "It's an open letter from — "

"Let me guess," I interrupt, because while I have never read his writing, I can read Granwell himself like a book. "It's from the one true love of my life."

"It's from the introduction to her autobiography," he answers, missing my finely wrought sarcasm. "It reads something like this: 'I wonder whether you know how strong a force you have been to me. For more than half a century, you have been the most dominant figure in my public life. To speak of me is to think of you.... You have accumulated so much affection over all the years that no one wants to kill you. What the whole world wants is to save you.'"

I pick up the remote, click on the television set, and flip to ESPN. Speed Week. Damn. I was hoping for a college football game.

"Don't her words mean anything to you?" asks Granwell. "Don't you ever think of her? Don't you have anything you want to say to her?"

So at last Parker Granwell comes clean. I mute the TV and shoot him my most feral expression, curling my lips and showing my fangs, but to be perfectly honest, there isn't much in me to be afraid of anymore.

I set down my beer. "Do you think you're the only bright-eyed reporter who has ever bothered to track me down, Granwell?" I say. "Hell, it's been sixty years since I made that flick. You all come looking for the same thing. You want to find this gigantic, forlorn ape, pining after the woman of his dreams, the woman whose heart he could never capture because he's nothing but a savage beast. And none of you can bear the fact that it just isn't so." I pause long enough to stifle a growl deep in my chest. "The truth is I'm not a savage beast and never was. I never loved that screeching bitch. I never even *liked* her. In fact, I could barely tolerate her. I was *acting*, plain and simple. She used to give me migraine headaches on the set like you wouldn't believe. Cooper hired her for her piercing scream, which as far as I can tell was her only talent. And she made up for her inadequacies by burrowing into the Hollywood social scene like some pathetic maggot. Who was Cary Grant dating and was Hepburn as good an actress as everybody said and was Fitzgerald going to be at this party or at that one? Christ, she made me want to puke!" Instead I belch, which suits me and my mood just fine.

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Granwell just sort of shakes his head. I can see it in his eyes: This won't do at all, he's thinking. He's already put his notebook away. He says, "Paul Johnson wrote an appreciation of you in the *New Statesman* back in the sixties. It was brilliant. He called you a creature of intelligible rage, nobility, pathos. He called you a prehistoric Lear. And he was right, you know. You're America's only king."

They all come to this realization sooner or later. Elvis won't cut it because of the drugs and some of the ugly things he did and stood for which just won't go away, and they've learned too much about Kennedy, and the world is too hard and cold and jaded now to come up with anything better. America may be a land of riches and excess and (some say) even self-made royalty, but it is not a land of monarchs. No, there's only one king. Me. The ape. "I'm sorry I don't live up to your expectations."

Granwell sighs. "So if we just leave you alone, if we let you pass your time quietly here on Earth, we can take comfort in knowing that your myth will survive."

I nod. "Don't sweat it, Parker. Most people have already forgotten about me. I'm out of the loop, man. All the golden anniversary celebrations for that stupid movie — I didn't get a single engraved invitation. Not one. De Laurentis never called to consult with me about the remake. I didn't even get an invite to that White House thing back in '75. But *she* was there, kissing up to Jimmy and Rosalyn Carter." This time I can't hold back the growl. "She wouldn't have missed it for the world."

"Don't you think you're being a little tough on her? She was one of the most popular actresses of her day, worked with every major male lead in the business — and then, to be frank, you ruined her. After your film, the monster-movie offers came pouring in, and nobody would give her the serious roles she deserved."

Granwell's no different than the rest of them. By the time they finish talking to me, they wish they never found me, and so do I. "Look, man, I'm just a gorilla. I don't share your sense of tragedy."

Granwell sets his beer down, slides off the banana crate, and walks to the door. "Thanks for the chat."

I call after him: "If you want to make an old ape happy before he dies, print the truth."

"You will never die," he says, and walks out.

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Touché.

Suddenly I could use some Canadian Club. I pour myself a tall one, drop down on my mattresses, and start flipping through the channels. I pull the covers up to my chin and listen to the fierce wind howling through the empty lot behind the warehouse. I've got a chill I can't get rid of. Regardless of the temperature, some nights are colder than others.

Fifty-seven channels and there's nothing on. Yet on any given night, if I can keep my eyes propped open long enough to catch the late shows...if I don't pass out from the booze or the beer or the boredom...chances are, sooner or later, I'll come across my favorite film.

"I guess that's somebody's *idea of heaven, but it's not mine."*

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FILMS

HARLAN ELLISON'S WATCHING

Installment 49:
In Which the Old Man of the Sea
Bites the Head off Yet Another Chicken

IF YOU'RE reading this installment on or about 7 January 1995, you may lift and clink crystal champagne flutes, intone a solemn *Here's lookin' at* you, *kid*, and amaze your friends with the diurnally appropriate datum that the movies are *exactly* 101 years old today, as you take your first sip. *L'chaim!*

On 7 January 1894 (and I'd have told you this *last* year for its centenary significance, had I been here; but I was on sabbatical in Tibet, where I acquired the uncanny power to cloud mens' minds so they cannot see me, as you already know) Thomas Edison received copyright on "a moving visual image" he had titled *Fred Ott's Sneeze*, and thus, just so, the medium of the motion picture, the cinema, the movies, was born. 1894 to 1995: that's one hundred and one years. Happy birthday. *L'chaim!*

And now to work.

If you recall, in yesterday's installment, yr. faithful correspondent had copped to the secret agenda of being a stone in-love-with-*The-Shadow* kinda guy, who had lusted after the gig of writing the theatrical feature for, oh nothing important, only maybe ***THIRTY GAHDAMN YEARS***...inhale ...exhale...inhale...exhale...and had begun to diss the Universal Pictures' PG-13 forty-five million dollar infantile crepuscular film-fart, THE SHADOW, when time ran out and we had to cut to commercial, film at 11. So, now, back to work.

Yet let us get to the job-site by way of Enlightenment Blvd. and Arguing From the Greater to the Lesser Avenue. We can car-pool and avoid all the

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traffic snarls on the Infommercial Superhighway where apologists for fatheaded films clog the pathways of perception.

Back in May of 1994, the book critic of *New York* magazine, Walter Kirn, while in the process of reviewing a tome we need not consider here, made some devastatingly accurate observations about baby-boomers. He said, in part, they "tend to be...citizens of a sociological state whose borders are dates of birth and cultural references, whose flag shows a guitar and a TV set, and whose myth of moral superiority derives from an association with 'blameless' liberation movements. ...They see pop culture since the fifties as a kind of epic home movie that they never tire of replaying, insisting it has lessons for us all. ...They say they can't stop thinking about tomorrow, but what they really can't stop thinking about is themselves."

Kirn sideswipes the b-b brigade for its "generational arrogance" and its members as "champions of dreck" and in closing he wrote *this* eye-opener: "Nothing is inevitable, and no generation will ever change the world by watching TV and listening to lots of records."

(He probably would've resonated more purely had he tried to be a tot more *courant* by substituting computer bulletin boards for TV, and CDs for records, but that's just bibblebibble on my part. The point he makes is irrefutable and crushingly painful to consider.)

I give you a moment to do just that. To consider.

The Shadow lies at the penultimate destination of this essay. THE MASK (New Line Cinema) is the ultimate. Not "ultimate" in the Socratic sense of final, absolute, the last word, the apex, the pinnacle; merely ultimate in that it is the last fuel stop on this filmic hadj. The end-point to be reached through sunny side-trips and metaphoric shortcuts.

Let us pause, here at this scenic turnout overlooking the verdant valley below. Let us open the door and emerge from the sealed-off interior of our media-assault womb, this traveling prison cell that keeps us so jangled with colors and sounds and false impressions that we cannot let our minds cool, cannot take that celebrated cortical-thalamic pause to examine what it is we're being pressured into accepting as State of the Art.

(Perfect example: what the critic John Powers calls "the flying-glass school of cinema." *Lethal Weapon, The Last Action Hero, The Last Boy Scout, Blown Away, The Specialist,* and on and on, with shards protruding from your cerebellum.)

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The way it used to have been, films were made by men and women who had some familiarity with the literary landscape. Whether those good souls, talented and untalented alike, wended their way to Hollywood via the dustjacketed word, the newspaper essay, the legitimate stage, the regional theater, or from some rural or foreign cinematic venue, there was a common tongue spoken: Art.

Even those who produced nothing but *schlock*, drivel unfit for imprint on a gnat's memory, the veriest crap of woebegone idiots...even they could hold a conversation in the *Lingua Franca.* They understood, dimly dimly, what it was all about. Even *they*, slope-browed simulacra of Creative Intellects, even *they* knew that Ben Hecht and Joe Mankiewicz and Billy Wilder and Val Lewton and Ida Lupino dealt in some form of Art. Even *they*, lowest of the low, incapable or unwilling to go against the formidable odds when attempting to produce High Art, understood that *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* and *The 400 Blows* and *La Strada* and *King Kong*—by chance or intent —transcended the callow commercial goals set by the secret cabal of Schlock Entrepreneurs and Anal Retentive Intellectuals. Even *they*, with noses flattened against the window, looking in at Welles as he created *The Magnificent Ambersons*, at John Ford filming *Stagecoach*, at Ted Browning throwing sanity to the winds and making *Freaks*...even *they* knew how to speak the language. They were envious and defended their puny efforts with patently self-serving rationales, but they *knew* what Art was. Because it was held up for them to marvel at. It was *there*, somewhere, every day, in the flex and surge of the popular culture. Maybe not today in a movie, but at least today in a book; maybe not today in a Broadway opening, but at least today in an outspoken newspaper column. Maybe not here today, but definitely not gone tomorrow.

Today, that flex and surge is less and less apparent in popular culture. We have abrogated our debt to the past, and our hope for the future, by permitting *everything* the p.c. accolade of worthiness. So tell me, gentle reader, determined to be "new age permissive," from what university of higher education, and in precisely what rigor, did Dr. Dré get his diploma? What, exactly, is it that Sharon Stone has between her legs, possessed by at least fifty percent of the population of the planet, that is sufficiently startling, unique, or eloquent to convince us that this woman can act? Shouldn't the correct term be "boneheads," not "skinheads"? And maintaining the precision of

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form-follows-function vernacular — risking the opprobrium of the putatively aggrieved — shouldn't the homosexual opposite of "straight" not be "gay," but more correctly..."straighter"?

Everything is okay. And any objection is beaten back by artificially enhanced outrage. Bad money drives out good money; bad art seeds the landscape with a crabgrass of tolerance for *anything*, without discrimination, sans standards, and it chokes out good art. There is no continuity of memory. The young go to the theaters, and they see *The Fugitive* (at best) or *The Beverly Hillbillies, Dennis the Menace, The Flintstones, Super Mario Brothers, Maverick, The Brady Bunch, The Addams Family, Lassie,* or *The Jetsons* (have I missed anything, if so, fill in the blanks). They know no better. The world began for them at dawn this morning. (As one arrogant little piss-ant put it, at a recent San Diego Comic-Con, as a group of older comics professionals tried to explain to him why the seminal creations of Wally Wood, Lou Fine, C.C. Beck, and Mac Raboy should be remembered and honored, "Dead guys don't count.")

(According to reports, there were a couple of people in that group who wanted to make the piss-ant "not count" real fast.)

The common language is now a "dead" language, no less arcane and reduced to white noise than Permian, Kipchak, Ligurian, or Ossetic. The everyday conversational of Art is now the tenebrous chatty-talk of academics and goony writers like me. No one even bothers to ask *why* the world needs a movie based on *The Brady Bunch.* Trying to quantify or contextualize the value of any given motion picture, attempting to link movies to what is happening in the world outside those dark, still rooms where something other than an immediate compositional punch, however stylish and not boring should be the sought chalice, becomes an exercise in profound and introspective musing. A conversation in a dead language.

The baby-boomer audience needs a feeling of movement; it needs a feeling of spectacle, even grandiloquence, hotcha style. It is bewitched by the grotesque. It is all-permitting. It sits there admiring *itself*, without a scintilla of self-criticism, unable to look at hard truths along that highway. It is devoid of conscience, otherwise how could it permit itself to be so easily manipulated, how could it permit such atrocities of random horror without squeaking a peep? The world began for this audience at dawn this morning.

It would never even *think* of asking why the world needed a live-action

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Flintstones flick. Out the potboiler came on the summer platter of fast-films (with fries, super-sized) and was gulped down without anyone asking if it was grilled at a temperature over 155 degrees Fahrenheit. Gulped down, with all its *E. coli* virulence, and the system logs in another jot of poison that builds up the immunity.

Given this audience — fair game for anything idiotic if it tinkles to the memory of childhood passions — even though the memory eliminates the truth that *even when new* these were dopey ideas—disco was shit back then, and no amount of "nostalgia" graverobbing will make it less than shit a second time around — and that goes for *How Much is that Doggie in the Window*, too — is it any wonder that *The Shadow* comes up a chipper example of The Walking Dead?

Written by baby-boomers, directed by baby-boomers, and produced by and *for* baby-boomers, a cultural icon from an earlier time cannot be permitted to sing its song in ragtime. It has to be rendered in hip-hop, or be designated hincty.

Are you still considering?

We near the penultimate point of our journey.

I shall return.

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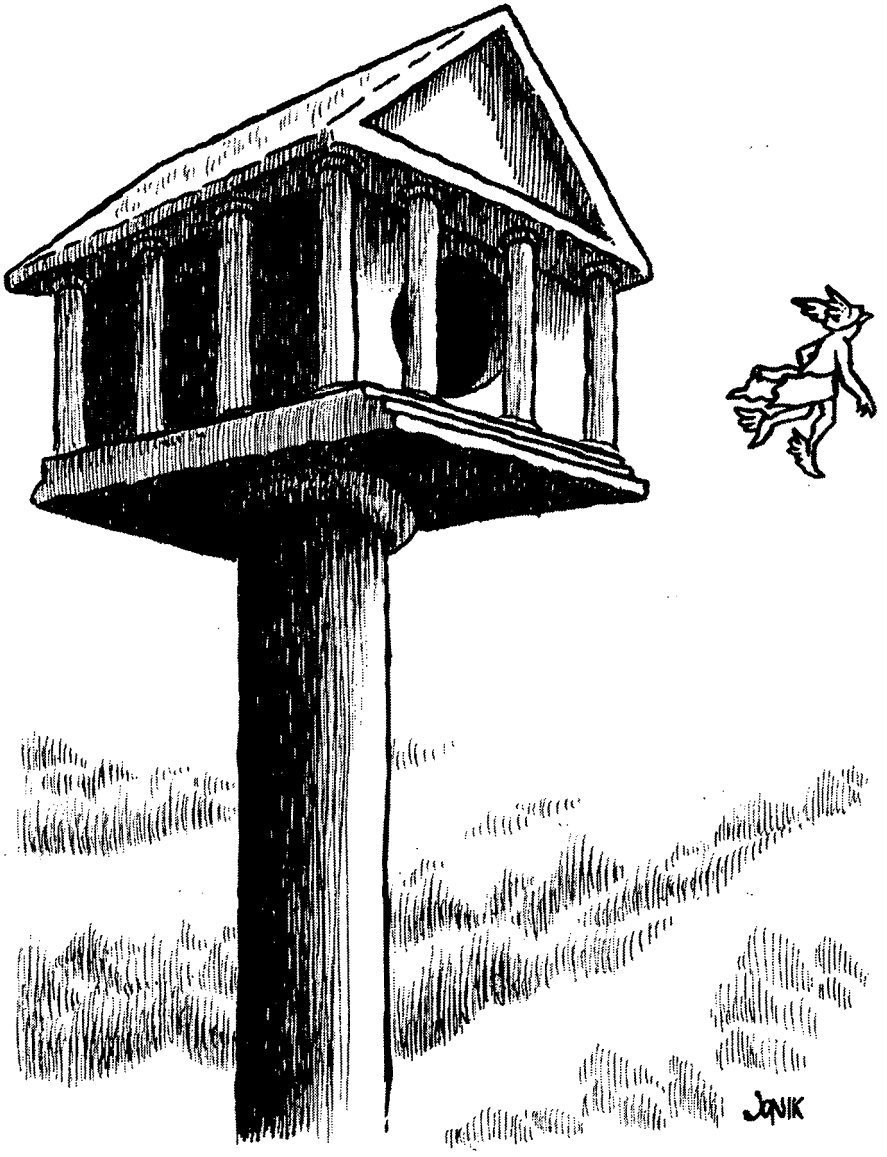

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Dean Whitlock has been absent from our pages for far too long. His last appearance, "The Man Who Loved Kites," was our cover story for the December 1991 issue. Dean has been working on novels in the years since. But he has managed to send us "Three Gifts."

He writes that the story "evolved over the course of several vacations at several beaches. I picked up a piece of shell and drew some pictures in the wet sand, then saw the waves wash them away. My reverence for the sea started me thinking in terms of religion, faith, and miracles."

Three Gifts

By Dean Whitlock

ON HER SIXTH BIRTHDAY, Moira laid her right hand on the belly of a sick child, and the child was cured. For the next six years, farmers and townsfolk came from miles around to feel Moira's healing touch.

On her twelfth birthday, Moira went into a trance and, through her left eye — the blue one — foresaw the death of the old king. For the next six years, commons and gentry came from throughout the land to pay for a vision.

On her eighteenth birthday, the Secretary to the Throne himself brought Moira and her parents to the capital. There she was given apartments and fine clothes and rich food. In exchange, her only labor was to use her gift of Sight. That, and bear the fears and follies of those who sought her visions. Early on, one or two who remembered came to her for healing, but that gift faded beneath the power and demands of her Sight. For twenty-one years, whether she wished it or not, the king and his cabinet and his generals and priests came to her daily to demand what futures she might see with her blue eye. Her parents died, and all that remained to her was her Sight. She came to hate it.

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On the morning of her thirty-ninth birthday, Moira left behind her fine clothes and wealth and the daily impatience of the court. All she carried with her was a bit of bread, a small bag of coins, and a life of bitter memories. Wrapped in a loose cloak and hood that hid her dark hair and mixed-color eyes, she slipped out through back doors to back alleys traveled by tired people with no will to guess at the quiet figure that walked past them. She kept her head down like theirs and avoided their touch, sick to heart of the company of all people. She stayed head down with her hood pulled low till she came to the first muddy creek that fed Great Bay. Then, with the tang of salt and marsh grass lifting her spirit, she lifted her head and walked upright, hood flung back and both eyes staring forward toward the present.

In another three days, she came to the cottage on the leeward brow of Weather Head. There, in the home she had left twenty-one years before, she made a simple meal of food bought in the village beyond the marsh and drank a homecoming toast of new wine. Then she settled like a seal on a sunny rock, content to watch the days go by her door and the tide turn in a simple pattern that anyone could divine, with or without the gift of Sight. She would have stayed there, too, and grown to an old woman, happy to be alone, but for the coming — and going — of Brother Simon.

On the very next morning after she reached the cottage, in the middle days of September, Moira rose to fog, a cataract of swirling cloud borne in off the sea on the back of the full moon tide. The soft new world beyond her doorway beckoned. She stepped out into curling damp and felt the grasses catch at the clinging hem of her skirt. With a skip in her heart she bent to kilt it up and saw a blue flower, turned pastel in the fog. The sky was gray, the grass was gray, the very air was gray. Only the color blue remained, in a petaled wheel. It was the color of her left eye.

She took that as an omen and turned toward the sound of waves to walk by feel and memory down the narrow path to the beach. The way seemed longer than she remembered, and the path more rugged, but then it took the final turn and led her out onto the granite ledge that dipped into soft sand, the only sand for miles on either side of Weather Head. She pressed her toes through the few grains of damp into dryness. She sighed with a memory of childhood. The fog swirled past her face on a warming breeze.

Without a thought to the future or a care for another soul, she walked down through soft sand and firm sand to the edge of the ebbing tide. Thin lines

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of gray-white foam lapped gently at the shore. The quiet waves still held the leftover warmth of summer. Moira shrugged off her blouse, slid from her skirt, and walked into the water. She swam and floated, tasted salt, and felt the cool touch of the sea caress her tired skin. Standing waist deep where the gentle swell could rise from thigh to breast, she closed her eyes and saw nothing. She opened them and saw only gray. For the first time since her youth, she was truly alone, far from the grasping eyes of her daily audience. She felt free.

Then, in a sudden twist of wind, the gray fog thinned above her head and sunlight came down in a gold nimbus that seemed somehow both dim and too bright at once. She looked up at a circle of hue that was not quite a rainbow, then looked back down to see the whole length of the beach bending out to the granite ledge of the lesser headland that had no name but served to frame the sand. And standing on the beach was a man.

At first Moira thought it was her Sight, and the figure a vision of someone's future. She closed her eyes and rubbed her hand hard against the left one, willing it to normal vision. "I left you in the city," she muttered, commanding her unloved talent to leave her. So, when she opened her eyes again, she knew that what she saw was real, even though the man was still there, swirled round by broken strands of fog. She felt anger at his presence. It marred her solitude.

The man was bent over with his back to her, standing on the hard sand in the range of the tide, just beyond the reach of the ebbing waves. The fog distorted his image, and Moira wondered if he were sick, or if he had lost something, or if he were crippled. As if to answer her, he made two or three sharp gestures against the sand with his right hand and stood up, straight and easy. Then he turned toward her. His eyes were closed, and his face held a look she had seen only half a dozen times in her thirty-nine years. One of those people had just given birth to her first child. One had just triumphed in battle. One had just knelt in prayer.

The man stood that way, erect and wordless, moving slightly to the pulse of the waves. The fog swirled back and forth. Then the man turned away and walked a few steps down the beach, bent again, and swung his hand across the sand. Moira saw that he was writing.

The shielding sea was around her, but the fog was there between them, and he seemed so intent she decided to try for the shelter of her clothes. She

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moved quietly sideways through the water, then made quickly for them. Halfway up the hard sand, she stepped on a row of script drawn in fine lines along the beach. Surprised, forgetting she was naked, Moira stopped and studied the characters. They were no writing she knew. They were more like pictographs inscribed in the sand with a sharp blade. She saw one like a fish and another like a bird, but there were many more that were simply curved lines and intersections, circles and patterns of quick slashes in the gray-brown parchment offered by the beach.

She frowned with the effort of reading something that would not be read. Then she laughed wryly at her stubborn efforts. "You've given up the Sight," she told herself, "yet here you are fixed on seeing the meaning of everything. And you are naked."

She looked around furtively, and found herself watched by the man. He was yards away, at the other end of the line of drawings or words or whatever it was in the sand. She saw he had blue eyes, like the blue of her flower, incongruous under dark hair and heavy brows. They were both blue. And they were quite startled.

Moira felt herself blushing. She turned away and went quickly to her clothes. She looked back at him, and saw he had turned away and was facing the sea. His lips moved as though he were speaking to it. He glanced at her from the corner of his eye, then flushed when he saw her looking and turned further away. Moira, grateful for his uncommon grace, quickly donned her clothes. Brushing back her dark wet hair, she turned to him and said, "Good morning."

He glanced at her almost shyly and nodded. "It is," he replied. "The sea is calm." His voice was a bit rough, a match to his hair and brows. His words seemed a match to the enigmatic line of text that stretched between them. It wasn't what he said, for the sea was truly calm. It was how he spoke. He made the words a benediction.

"Forgive me this embarrassment," she said curtly. "I had no idea there was anyone here."

"It's no bother," he replied. "I shouldn't have stared so. It was just...when I saw you step from the sea...the fog made me think..." He seemed at a loss for words and glanced down at the line of marks he had made in the sand. "I thought perhaps you were an angel," he admitted finally, and he blushed a little as he said it.

Moira laughed, but not in humor. "I've heard many people call me

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devil," she said. "Never an angel. My name is Moira. I live up there."

She gestured back toward Weather Head, and he glanced up briefly.

"It is a gifted spot," he said.

His choice of words made her turn and look up at the headland, with its sweep of grass and the blunted trees that stood less than roof-high behind her little cottage. Her eyes followed the seamed granite down past roosting gulls to the gray-blue water, now almost clear of fog, then back along the tidal shelf to the beach. The lifting sun turned the tops of the waves silver.

"Yes," she agreed, coming back at last to his face. "It is."

They stood a moment, regarding each other in silence. He glanced at Moira's left eye, then brought his gaze back to the rest of her face.

"Do you have a name?" she asked him brusquely, resenting that glance.

He blushed again beneath his sun-browned skin. "I do," he admitted, then straightened slightly and said, "I am called Brother Simon."

"Well, Brother Simon," she said, "where do you live?"

"I live here," he said, with a gesture toward the far end of the beach.

Moira saw nothing that resembled a house, and suspected he was a homeless wretch who had settled for the season on this, her beach. She hoped the coming fall would send him inland to warmer nests.

"Well," she said again, "I enjoy walking and I enjoy swimming. I hope that won't disrupt your daily tasks."

He shook his head. "When I see you come down, I will move to the little head and make my prayers there."

"Thank you," Moira said dryly.

She turned and walked back up the path, her enchanted morning spoiled, and her curiosity over his strange writing unsatisfied.

She saw Brother Simon only at a distance the next day. He was there on the beach when she came out in the morning, but he moved away as soon as he saw her. She swam with a wary eye his way, but he stayed a dark spot at the edge of the far headland. Then she walked along the mile or so of beach, and he disappeared around the curve of the rocks. She spied his home, a shanty of grayed wood thatched with saltmarsh hay and hardly large enough to lie down in. An outdoor hearth of rounded stones showed the remains of last night's fire. She smelled cooked fish. His strange script covered the sand by the water. The tide had erased his lines of the day before, yet he had already covered the better part of the beach with new designs. Her curiosity rose.

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The next morning, he was nowhere to be seen, and she walked all the way to the rocks at the far end of the beach, studying his writing. Just as she got there, Brother Simon clambered over the top and stopped with a little oh of surprise. His hands were full of mussels, wet and black and barnacled.

"Forgive me," he said. "I didn't know you were here."

His presence irked her, but she said, "There's nothing to forgive."

He smiled pleasantly, almost with relief it seemed, and showed her the mussels. "Breakfast," he said. "Would you like some?" Moira started to refuse but he insisted. "There are plenty," he said. "Our Father is generous."

"I will take a few then," she said.

"As many as you like," he told her, offering the handful.

She pulled out three and dropped them into her pocket, where they immediately soaked through to wet her thigh. Frowning, she turned and walked back toward Weather Head. Simon walked beside her, and Moira tried to ignore him, but soon enough she realized he was limping.

"What have you done to your foot?" she asked.

"It's nothing," he replied. "I stepped on an urchin."

She thought it served him right and walked on in silence, but the pain in his steps was so obvious that she couldn't ignore it. "Did you get all of the spines out?" she asked.

"I think so," he said.

"Let me see," she ordered. He started to protest, but she insisted. "They can fester."

She made him sit, and crouched in the sand to look at his foot. In the peak of the arch she saw a pattern of black spots in his thick brown sole. Several were already ringed with red.

"Hold still," she ordered, and she squeezed at one of them with her fingers, trying to force out the broken spine. Simon gasped and gritted his teeth, but kept his foot still. Moira looked at the pain on his face and back at the red spots. Her right hand began to tingle, a tiny feeling, like the distant memory of a touch. Uncertainly, she placed her palm upon his sole and closed her eyes, letting happen whatever healing was there. When she lifted her hand away, she was almost surprised to see that the spots were smaller and the redness had begun to fade.

He was staring at her with amazement. "The pain is almost gone," he said. "What did you do?"

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"Very little," she said dryly. "There was a time I was a healer, but that was long ago."

"Not so very long," he remarked. "My foot is now healed."

"Not hardly," she told him, "and it wasn't much of a wound to begin with. The real power has left me."

"How so?" he asked. "To lose such a gift?"

She rose stiffly and brushed the sand from her skirt. "I saw too much," she said, "that took the joy out of healing."

She started walking, and he scrambled up and hurried to match her pace. His limp was gone. She stared at the sand, squinting in the bitter glare of memories. The silence grew awkward. As they neared his little hut, though, she realized she was staring at his pictures in the sand, so she asked him, "What are these writings?"

"They are prayers," he said simply.

"I can't read them," she said. "What language is that?"

He flushed a little and admitted, "No language. I never learned to write words."

"Do they mean something?" she pressed.

He nodded and said, "Yes, they are prayers."

The naiveté of his answer irked her more than his company. How could there be meaning without words? "To who?" she demanded. "Who reads these wordless prayers of yours?"

He looked out toward the blue-gray lens of the sea and said, "Our Father. Two times each day He feels these shapes with the fingers of His waves, and then He knows the prayers that are in my soul."

Moira looked up and down the beach, at the long lines of design scratched from one headland to the other in the sand. She looked out at the long lines of waves that waited for the tide to push them over the beach, so they could scour the sand clean.

"Twice each day?" she wondered. "Is this some penance?"

"No," he said, "it is prayer." He grinned self-consciously. "I was a farmer inland," he said. "I never saw our Father Sea until this year, though I had heard tales of His great size and depth and His constant tides. When I saw Him, I knew the tales were but whispers of His true glory. I knew I was meant to worship Him."

"You think the sea is God?" she asked in disbelief.

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"God is everywhere," Simon told her, "but I see Him best in the sea."

"Oh," Moira replied, and felt stupid saying something so plain in response to a statement so vast.

He stared out at the sea, as if transfixed. "What do you see," he asked, "when you pray?"

"I don't pray," she answered. "Thank you for the mussels, and wash that foot well in the salt water. It can still fester."

She turned and walked away, feeling his startled eyes upon her.

Moira stayed at her end of the beach for several days. Simon stayed at his end when she was out, though she saw him bent to his twice daily task whenever the tide was low, and he wrote on her end of the beach whenever she returned to her cottage. She was surprised to find his prayers waiting on the sand no matter how early she rose. Curious, she watched late one night, and saw him writing by firelight, dragging an old brazier along the beach beside him with a rusty chain. He lived by the tides, not the sun.

His drawings were always close enough to the water that the tide would reach them, and they always stretched the full length of the beach. And though they were graceful and often beautiful, she was irritated when they blocked her way to the water. She found herself reluctant to walk on them, and that irked her even more. She picked her way between them at first, feeling constrained to a path that was not her own choosing. She remembered her daily walks through the palace and the shuttered glances of everyone she passed. She had walked a maze to avoid those prying and fearful eyes, till she had finally learned to ignore them. She tried to ignore Simon's writings and walk straight down to the water. If he noticed, it made no difference. Every day and every night he wrote his prayers.

She realized eventually that his presence had constrained her to less than a quarter of the beach. She also realized that it was she who let his presence meddle in her life. On that morning, when she ended her swim, she set off again to walk all the way to the little head.

The tide was high, covering all sign of Simon's prayers. Moira walked briskly at the top of the beach, enjoying the work of stepping through soft sand. She saw Simon ahead of her, sitting outside his little hut, but kept her path straight. When she reached him, she stopped and said good morning, determined to be civil. He looked up from his work and smiled.

"It is a good morning," he said. "The Sea is calm."

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He was bending saplings into a hoop as tall as himself, tying the ends with rawhide strips that were soaking in his old pot. There were more saplings beside him, and as he spoke, he lifted one and tied its end into the join of the hoop.

"What's this you're making?" she asked.

"A coracle," he said.

"To use on the sea?" she asked him skeptically.

"Yes," he said, "on calm days. I admit I'm no sailor, but I thought I would like to float on the breast of our Father." He grinned at her and added, "I might even catch more fish."

She laughed. "Aren't you afraid of offending him? They are, after all, his fish."

He became serious. "He provides them for our use, as He provides barley and wheat, goats and sheep. We are all His creatures and we all serve His purpose, each in our place."

Moira had no quick answer to such calm assurance. "How will you cover this boat of yours?" she asked, changing the subject brusquely.

"A farmer a little way inland has given me an ox hide and this rawhide," he said.

"A generous man," she commented dryly. "There are few of them in this world."

"I have found many," he said.

"And how did you repay his kindness?" she demanded.

"With prayer," Simon replied.

And just as he spoke, Moira heard someone cough. She looked inland to see a young woman coming down a path that ended at the line of grasses just above Simon's hut. The woman stopped when she saw Moira and hesitated at the edge of the beach, but she gathered her resolve and stepped down onto the sand. Simon put aside his sapling hoop and stood to greet her.

"Good morning, my child," he said, and Moira saw that the woman was indeed just past her childhood, a pale, thin girl of a woman with a great sadness in her eyes. She glanced again at Moira, who didn't try to hide her irritation at this new intrusion on her solitude. The girl looked away quickly.

"Good morning, Brother Simon," she said faintly, and coughed again. She stepped forward and a little away from Moira.

Simon waited patiently, with his hands folded before him. "What can I do for you?" he asked gently.

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"I...I've brought this," she said, taking another step forward and holding out a round, striped squash.

"Why, thank you, my child," he said. He took it from her and she stepped back. Her movements were quick and timid. "I will pray for you," Simon told her, and her great sadness changed to great hope.

She bobbed her head and mumbled her thanks. Then, with another stifled glance at Moira and another cough, she turned and fled down the path.

Simon watched her go with a look on his face that was both calm and troubled at once. His hands cradled the squash absently.

"Another pilgrim come to barter for your services, I see," Moira said sourly. "Soon the whole town will be here."

Simon seemed not to hear. "She was married last year," he said, "and has still not conceived. I write prayers that she will."

"Some women are barren," Moira remarked coolly, "or, more likely, their husbands are."

Simon looked at her. "She coughs night and day," he said. "I sometimes wonder if there might be some illness in her."

"Then perhaps you should pray first for a cure," Moira said, "and then for a baby."

"I have prayed for a cure," Simon replied, smiling, "and now you have come."

"What do you mean by that?" Moira demanded, though she well knew.

"You are a healer," he said. "The next time she comes — "

"I am not a healer," Moira snapped. "No longer."

"It is your gift," he said. "I have felt it myself. My foot is completely healed."

"The salt water did that," Moira told him.

"No," he insisted, "you have the gift."

"Damn your gifts," she said angrily. "I have had two too many of them and they are worthless."

"But to heal..." he said, his voice rising in awe.

"To heal! To see!" Moira spat into the sand. "I will tell you a story about these gifts. Once a prince, a man whose stupidity was outmatched only by his greed, came to ask a vision of me. Who would he marry? he demanded. Was it the daughter of a certain rich noble — whose lands, I might add, the prince greatly desired? I tried very hard not to have a vision for this man, but

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there is no denying this so-called gift, and it came upon me anyway. I saw him old and alone, with neither wife nor heir. And do you know what he did, Brother Simon? He had the girl killed for refusing him, though he had never yet asked for her hand."

Simon shook his head, horrified. "The man was evil," he said. "You can't judge everyone by him."

"A matter only of degree," she told him, "Princes and peasants and priests, you are all alike. You exclaim about my wondrous gifts and how they help the poor and sick and powerless, when all you want really is the power they can give you. How nice for you that my gift would give power to your prayers. I tell you, Brother Simon, I have seen how men use these gifts. I have seen..."

Moira stopped shouting and stared at Brother Simon. His coarse face began to waver before her eyes. The beach darkened and blurred as though under water. "No," she said, lifting her hands to cover her left eye. But it was too late. In a rush, her world went black and a vision came upon her.

When real sight returned, she was kneeling on the sand, and Simon was holding her head to keep her from pitching headlong into his hearth. With a strange attention to detail, the first clear thing she saw was the girl's squash, lying half buried in the sand where he had dropped it. She looked up and let her body sag back. Simon slowly let go.

"Are you all right?" he asked her.

She nodded and muttered yes with a dry mouth. He seemed to know and brought her a cup of water. She drank gratefully. Then she stared out at the sea, letting the last of the dizziness fade with the receding image of her vision.

"What did you see?" Simon asked, squatting beside her. His voice was gruff with wonder and a little fear, as if he had guessed.

"I saw your death," she told him simply, because she could not lie or refuse to tell. That was a part of this hated gift.

He drew in a breath and sat back on his heels. After a long pause, while he searched her face and then the surface of the sea, he asked her, "How?"

"In a storm," she said. "You were standing knee-deep in the water and a giant wave swept you under. You didn't try to swim."

"I don't know how," he said calmly.

Moira shook herself and sat more upright. "Perhaps you should learn," she told him, feeling not at all calm.

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He shook his head and said, "No."

"Do you want to drown in a storm?" Moira demanded harshly.

"If God wills it," he said, "it will happen." His calm unnerved her and she felt tears start in her eyes. Simon's look turned to one of concern. "Are you sure you're all right?" he asked.

"Yes," she snapped, but she was shaking. "I'm sorry," she said then, taking a deep breath. "The Sight does this to me."

"It is a frightful gift," he said.

"No gift," she muttered.

"As you will," he replied. "Let me make some tea."

Simon dumped out the rawhide and boiled chamomile and mint in his old pot. Moira drank the tea gratefully while he went back to work on his coracle.

"Thank you," she said when she was done. She set down the cup and rose, stiff and still shaky. "I must go back to the cottage."

He set aside the frame of saplings and rose with her. "And I must begin my prayers," he said. Moira stared at the waterline, surprised to see the tide already so low.

Simon picked up a thin shard of broken shell from a small collection by his hearth and stood a moment, watching her face. "Will you visit again?" he asked.

She sighed. "Will you promise to forget that I was ever a healer?"

"I will promise," he said, "if you promise not to walk on my prayers."

Moira said, "I promise."

She found it an easy promise to keep after all, even if it did seem like tracking through a maze at times to get near the water. But the weather grew cold soon and put an end to her swimming. She still took her walks, but they paralleled Brother Simon's prayers.

The cold did not stop Simon from his twice daily task, nor from setting out in his little coracle whenever the weather was calm. He did catch more fish that way, and shared them happily with Moira. She returned his kindness with bread and turnips and cabbage and other items that she had laid in with the coins she had carried out of the city. She would not take gifts from him; she would only share.

And she was not alone in that. The young woman came again, still coughing, and there were others, men and women, who came with food or

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sandals or an old cloak. What they asked in exchange were prayers, and he honored their wishes, scribing the sand diligently whenever the tide was out. He did this in cold and mist and even in rain, though the raindrops speckled his drawings and a downpour washed them away.

"The rain washes them into the Sea," he said. "It's all the same."

The storm season came then, and still Brother Simon worked. Moira brought him tea and hot stew, which he accepted with the same calm grace as he had her turnips. He had less to offer in return, for the heavy swells were more often too much for his coracle. Still, he found mussels and whelks and clams, and there was always an abundance of snails. Moira took some, but never many. On a gray windy day in November, she brought him a blanket, which he held gingerly for a moment, as though he would refuse.

Finally, he folded it square and laid it beside him on the cowhide that floored his little hut. "I will say a special prayer for you," he said.

"No," she told him, "waste no prayers on me. Save them for the others."

"No prayer is ever a waste," he said.

"You can give me your next fish," she replied. "I have missed them."

He smiled warmly, and she smiled back, realizing how much she had come to appreciate this odd neighbor, despite the too many supplicants his presence drew to her beach.

As she walked home in the early twilight, though, she felt the wind freshen and turn about to blow in from the sea. The waves rolled heavily onto the beach in unbroken lines edged with blowing spume. The prayers of the last tide were already washed from view. She glanced back at Simon's tiny hut and wondered how it would fare the night. A fitful light shone through the doorway as the flap of hide blew in the wind. She saw his silhouette tie down the hide, and the hut went dark, a squat cone huddled at the edge of the sand.

That night, the wind and the booming sea kept Moira awake through the darkness. It rained in brief gusts that rattled against the walls of her cottage. There was no sign of moon or stars. She looked out once and saw total darkness. She looked out later and saw the gleam of a light on the beach below. The tide had gone out, and Simon was at his work. She could see the light flicker madly in the stiff wind. She could just glimpse the edge of his body, outlined in the wavering glow. The lines of foam were edged with red from his fire, and they seemed to rear up behind him to twice his height and plunge up the beach to the very shadow of his heels.

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The storm continued into morning, and at midday Moira went down onto the beach. Simon was there again, his back turned to the surging waves. His lines of prayer were broken here and there by loops of sand scoured smooth by rogue waves that ignored the pull of the tide.

She walked to where he worked and stood with the lines of words between them. He didn't seem to notice.

"Simon," she called, shouting against the wind.

He looked up vaguely, as if he were under a spell.

"Turn around," she called. "Don't turn your back to a storm like this."

He nodded and smiled, and bent back to his work.

Again she shouted, "Simon!" And again he lifted his head. "You could be swept away," she called. "Turn around."

He did turn around, to look at the sea with an expression of awe and devotion. As if the sea had heard her, a huge wave broke right before them and rushed up the beach, wrapping their legs with foam and icy water. It carved the sand from under Moira's feet and made her stagger against its pull. Simon reached down and let it drag at his hand as it rushed back out to meet the next wave surging in.

Moira stepped to Simon's side and took his arm. "Move farther up the beach," she asked.

He obliged her with two steps.

"Farther," she told him, but he resisted and she grew angry. "Don't be a fool," she snapped. "Do you *want* to be drowned?"

"If it is God's will," he replied, in a voice so soft she almost couldn't hear it.

"What?" she demanded, jerking at his arm.

Gently, but firmly, he removed her hand. "If God wills it," he said, "I will be drowned."

"God does not will it!" Moira shouted, with more force than the wind demanded. "Why would he want you to die?"

"I can't profess to understand the ways of our Father," Simon answered. "Perhaps he is pleased with me, and is calling me to him." He stared pensively at the sea. "But maybe I have angered him in some way."

Moira gestured at the sea and said, "Take the shutters from your eyes, Simon. There is no malice in this storm. These waves are not messengers. The wind blows over the whole coastline, not just this tiny beach."

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But Simon shook his head. "You are thinking in human terms," he said. "You yourself saw me drowned. How else could you have seen it were it not a part of God's plan?"

Moira turned away, cursing her baneful eye. Then she spun back and cried out at him, "For all you know, it's the devil's plan! I have been cursed and blessed and prayed at and reviled by thousands of fools, none of whom understood my Sight any better than you. Do you see now why I curse these so-called gifts? Because people like you treat them as gospel in spite of all reason."

"Why do you curse your healing?" he asked.

"Because it stopped working!" she shouted.

Then, with an effort, she calmed herself. She stood between him and the sea and took his arm again. "Simon," she pleaded. "Don't by foolishness make my vision come true."

"Have any of your visions not come true?" he asked her.

She hesitated, then shook her head. "No," she admitted. "None that I know of."

"Then who is the fool?" he asked quietly.

"The vision didn't show the season," she insisted. "It doesn't have to be now."

"It will happen when it happens," he agreed. "It is God's will."

She dropped her hand and said, "No, Simon, no. I have seen years of visions, years of deaths and births and wars and plagues and quests and findings. Never did I see a pattern, never a reason. Never did I feel the hand of God, any god."

"Then how do you explain it?" he said. He raised his hands to the majesty of the churning, blowing sea.

"It is a human thing to feel wonder," she said.

"But this storm," he said. "So soon after your vision, how do you explain this?"

"The wind," she said. "It blows the water into waves."

"And what makes the wind?" he asked.

"The sun," she said. "Or the turning of the stars. I don't know, any more than I know what caused my Sight. But I don't need to create a God just so I can claim to understand it."

"Oh," he said, "I never claimed to understand Him. But I know He is there."

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He turned and went back to his writing, and Moira hunched her shoulders and went back up to the soft sand. She stood there watching him, wondering what she could say to make him at least move higher up the beach. She had given up hope of making him put aside his task. Even she felt awe before this raging sea.

She watched Simon move away from her, slicing at the sand with his broken shell, enraptured. Almost, she could envy him the simplicity of his life. She looked out at the sea again, and tried to let the wonder take her. She tried to see the face of God.

What she saw was a giant wave, cresting beyond the lowest reach of the tide and surging even higher as it sucked smaller waves back from the beach and made them part of its arching mass. It broke with a force that shook the beach and a roar that drowned the wind. Simon stood straight and turned to face it. He watched in stillness as it swept toward him. And Moira watched, too, hand to her mouth, unable to speak or move.

The foam was chest high when it struck Brother Simon, but he stood against it for a moment, long enough for it to get behind him. It held him upright, arms and head above the water as it floated him toward Moira. The farthest reach of the wave washed over the soft sand and touched her feet. Then it began to recede, carrying Simon with it. His head went down, his feet showed above the water. He rolled over and over in the dirty brown foam. And he made no move to save himself.

Anger stirred in Moira, anger at Simon and all the other believers who let her visions rule their future without question. The anger overcame her fear. She tore off her dress and ran down the beach into the cold grasping water. She stumbled against its mass, using her hands to drag herself faster toward Simon's receding body. He surged up over a smaller swell, then somersaulted backward at the top of the next crest. His arms flailed aimlessly in the swirl of the water. Moira dove under one wave and swam up the face of the second.

It broke in her eyes, blinding her with salt. She gagged on a mouthful of seawater and shook her eyes clear. The water seemed thick. It swirled and shifted in strange currents that broke her rhythm. She swam uphill and ducked under another wall of spray. She came up gasping, searching for Simon in the heaving waves. She swam up the next hill of water, feeling its weight on her arms. Her breath was ragged and sour. She topped the wave only to see another, larger swell bearing down on her. Before she could duck

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her head, it broke over her, and something large and heavy rolled onto her back.

It was Simon. Moira grabbed for his arms and felt him slipping away in the churning top of the wave. With a desperate effort, she kicked herself forward and clutched him around the chest. Her lungs ached with panic, but the wave was past, and she was able to force her head through clinging foam into air. She gulped half a breath, then twisted around and caught Simon from behind and under the arms. She held his head above the water and drew in breath after grateful breath.

The next wave came and almost tore Simon from her grasp, but it also pushed them closer toward land. Moira put her body between him and the waves and let the tide help her, swimming as much as she could down the hills of water, floating forward in the lines of foam. Finally they were at the beach, where a wave crested high and tumbled them over in a painful tangle of limbs. It tried to suck them back in, but Moira braced her feet in the shifting sand and held firmly to Simon. Each wave pushed them a little higher.

Then she had to drag him, staggering under his weight with muscles that shook with fatigue. She let him fall where the sand met the grass at the very top of the beach. She knelt beside him, gasping for breath herself, and tried to find breath in him.

There was nothing there. His chest was still. His eyes were an empty blue. Moira sank back onto the sand, feeling weary and bitter beyond words, but she knew she couldn't just lie there and let him die. She forced herself over onto her side and reached out her hand to his chest. With little hope, she laid her palm over his heart and closed her eyes, letting happen whatever healing was there.

She lay that way a long time, while the wind blew against her numb body and the waves shook the beach beneath her. She seemed to doze almost, or to enter a trance. When Simon's chest rose in a breath beneath her hand, she hardly noticed.

"What are you doing?" she heard him say.

With a surge of strength and wonder, she opened her eyes and rose up on her elbow, turning to face him with weary joy.

He stared at her, as if confused. "What have you done?" he said, and there was horror in his voice.

"What you wanted," she said. "I used my gift. I healed you."

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"Healed me?" he demanded. "By what right? My Lord has called me to Him."

"No," she said. "Don't you see?"

But he only glared at her and said, "Are you a devil, after all? How can you stand against your vision?"

"But the healing," she said, bewildered by exhaustion and the anger in his voice. "My first gift was the healing. And it's come back to me."

"I was not meant to be healed," he said, trying to rise. "I was meant to drown. In the Sea."

He sank back on the sand, too weak to move, but there was a great force in his eyes. He was suddenly calm. He relaxed against the sand and said, "I am coming, Father." Then he crossed his hands on his chest and closed his eyes.

"Simon!" Moira cried. "You are alive!"

He clenched his jaw and ignored her, and she was too weak to rise up and force his eyes open. She laid her hand back on his chest and felt his heartbeat, steady beneath her palm. She willed it to stay that way.

But Simon's faith prevailed. His breathing slowed despite her, till it was almost nothing. And then, suddenly, as if someone had blown out a candle, his heart stopped. She lay beside him till her hand grew numb and her body trembled from the cold, but his heart stayed still.

The storm blew out by morning. The sun rose over a calming sea, gray-blue under a pale blue sky. Moira still felt numb, but she went down to the beach anyway, to where Simon's body lay on the sand. She sat by him, watching as the sea grew more and more still. She cursed it silently, and she cursed her Sight as she never had before. She looked at Simon's still face and longed to see his rough smile. She could not bring herself to curse him for dying. Instead, she cried, heavy tears that tasted of waves and began to wash the chill from her heart. Slowly, her spirit stilled, like the sea.

When the sun had peaked, she brought the coracle from where he had tied it behind the line of grass. She set it at the water's edge and placed large stones in the bottom. Then she dragged Simon's body down across the empty sand and laid him inside. It took a long time, for her arms and legs still ached with weariness. But finally he was inside, and she tied his hands and feet to the frame. Then she took off her dress and waited for the rising tide to lift the little craft off the sand. She pushed it out and stepped in beside him, then took the paddle and drew the coracle far out past the gentle swells to deep water.

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"Be at rest," she told him, and she took the sharp piece of shell that he had used to draw in the sand and cut a slit in the oxhide shell of the boat. As the water came in, she slipped over the side and began swimming toward the shore.

She had gone out farther than she thought and the cold water numbed her again. She swam more and more slowly, till she was hardly treading water still a long way from shore. Almost, she stopped completely. Almost, she made the choice to let herself die. But she remembered Brother Simon foundering in the waves and remembered the anger that had made her try to save him. Moira gritted her teeth and swung her arms harder. She reached the shore.

By the time she had strength to stand, there was no sign of Brother Simon's coracle. Shivering, Moira drew on her dress and walked slowly to his little hut. The storm had torn large holes in the thatch, and the hide flap over the doorway had blown away completely. Moira looked inside, but there was nothing there to set aright, only his old pot and the brazier he had used to light his night-time writings.

As she stepped back outside, Moira heard a cough. Turning, she saw the pale face of the young woman who had come so often seeking prayers. The girl seemed even thinner in the cold light of late day. She bore a pumpkin that seemed bright and huge below her pale, frail face.

"Is Brother Simon here?" she asked timidly.

"No," Moira said, with a catch in her voice that she couldn't quite control. "He's gone."

All hope fled the girl's face, and Moira felt a sudden kinship. That barren glance seemed a mirror to her own spirit on the day before she left the palace.

If Simon were here, she thought, he would offer the kindness of prayer.

It came to her then that kindness had been Simon's true gift, and that, whatever his reasons, it was a gift to match either of hers. It also came to her that, although Simon was dead, she, Moira, was not. And life required gifts. Tears came again to her eyes as she thought of the gifts that she had to offer — Sight that people lacked the wisdom to use, and healing that she lacked the strength to offer.

Then, as if in a vision, she saw the girl holding, not a pumpkin, but a child. It was her last vision, though she did not know it then, and it was the only vision she accepted with joy.

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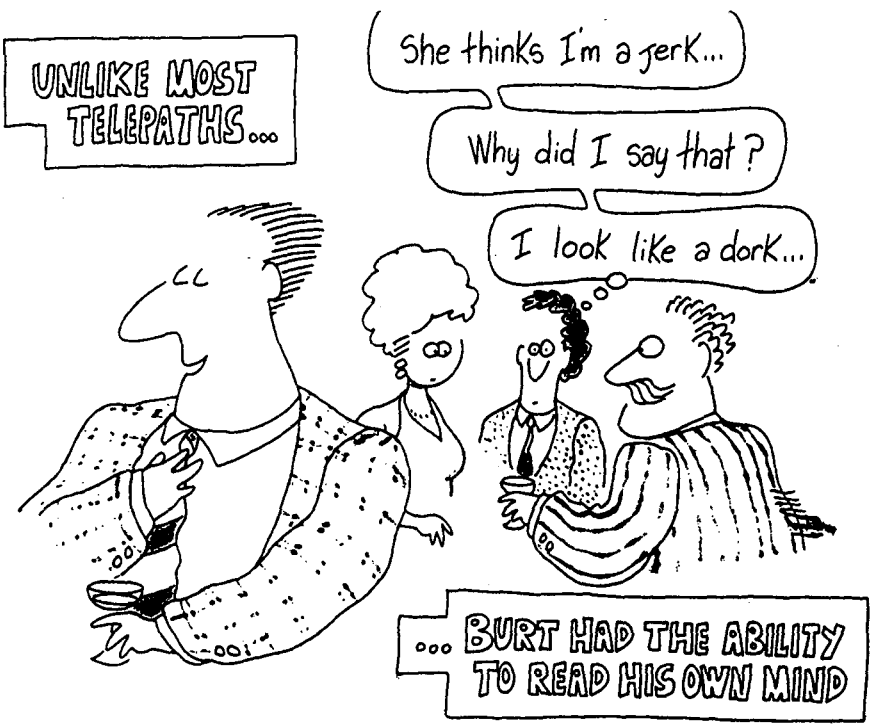
"Come here, child," she said.

The girl glanced at her left eye fearfully.

Moira smiled. "It's all right," she said, "I can't harm you." She held out just her hand, knowing that the girl would flee if she moved toward her. "Come," she said.

The girl came, slowly and fearfully, but she did come.

"Hold still," Moira said. "I am a healer." And she laid her hand on the girl's chest. The girl flinched, but stayed. Moira closed her eyes and saw Brother Simon's face, but it was only memory. She felt a great sadness. Then she put it aside, to let happen whatever healing was there.



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SCIENCE

BRUCE STERLING

BITTER RESISTANCE

TWO HUNDRED thousand bacteria could easily lurk under the top half of this semicolon; but for the sake of focussing on a subject that's too often out of sight and out of mind, let's pretend otherwise. Let's pretend that a bacterium is about the size of a railway tank car.

Now that our fellow creature the bacterium is no longer three microns long, but big enough to crush us, we can get a firmer mental grip on the problem at hand. The first thing we notice is that the bacterium is wielding long, powerful whips that are corkscrewing at a blistering 12,000 RPM. When it's got room and a reason to move, the bacterium can swim ten body-lengths every second. The human equivalent would be sprinting at forty miles an hour.

The butt-ends of these spinning whips are firmly socketed inside rotating, proton-powered, motor-hubs. It seems very unnatural for a living creature to use rotating wheels as organs, but bacteria are serenely untroubled by our parochial ideas of what is natural.

The bacterium, constantly chugging away with powerful interior metabolic factories, is surrounded by a cloud of its own greasy spew. The rotating spines, known as flagella, are firmly embedded in the bacterium's outer hide, a slimy, lumpy, armored bark. Studying it closely (we evade the whips and the cloud of mucus), we find the outer cell wall to be a double-sided network of interlocking polymers, two regular, almost crystalline layers of macromolecular chainmail, something like a tough plastic wiffleball.

The netted armor, wrinkled into warps and bumps, is studded with hundreds of busily sucking and spewing orifices. These are the bacterium's

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"porins," pores made from wrapped-up protein membrane, something like damp rolled-up newspapers that protrude through the armor into the world outside.

On our scale of existence, it would be very hard to drink through a waterlogged rolled-up newspaper, but in the tiny world of a bacterium, osmosis is a powerful force. The osmotic pressure inside our bacterium can reach 70 pounds per square inch, five times atmospheric pressure. Under those circumstances, it makes a lot of sense to be shaped like a tank car.

Our bacterium boasts strong, highly sophisticated electrochemical pumps working through specialized fauceted porins that can slurp up and spew out just the proper mix of materials. When it's running its osmotic pumps in some nutritious broth of tasty filth, our tank car can pump enough juice to double in size in a mere twenty minutes. And there's more: because in that same twenty minutes, our bacterial tank car can build an entire duplicate tank car from scratch.

Inside the outer wall of protective bark is a greasy space full of chemically reactive goo. It's the periplasm. Periplasm is a treacherous mess of bonding proteins and digestive enzymes, which can yank tasty fragments of gunk right through the exterior hide, and break them up for further assimilation, rather like chemical teeth. The periplasm also features chemoreceptors, the bacterial equivalent of nostrils or taste-buds.

Beneath the periplasmic goo is the interior cell membrane, a tender and very lively place full of elaborate chemical scaffolding, where pump and assembly-work goes on.

Inside the interior membrane is the cytoplasm, a rich ointment of salts, sugars, vitamins, proteins, and fats, the tank car's refinery treasure-house.

If our bacterium is lucky, it has some handy plasmids in its custody. A plasmid is an alien DNA ring, a kind of fly-by-night genetic franchise which sets up work in the midst of somebody else's sheltering cytoplasm. If the bacterium is unlucky, it's afflicted with a bacteriophage, a virus with the modus operandi of a plasmid but its own predatory agenda.

And the bacterium has its own native genetic material. Eukaryotic cells — we humans are made from eukaryotic cells — possess a neatly defined nucleus of DNA, firmly coated in a membrane shell. But bacteria are prokaryotic cells, the oldest known form of life, and they have an attitude toward their DNA that is, by

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our standards, shockingly promiscuous. Bacterial DNA simply sprawls out amid the cytoplasmic goo like a circular double-helix of snarled and knotted Slinkies.

Any plasmid or transposon wandering by with a pair of genetic shears and a zipper is welcome to snip some data off or zip some data in, and if the mutation doesn't work, well, that's just life. A bacterium usually has 200,000 or so clone bacterial sisters around within the space of a pencil dot, who are more than willing to take up the slack from any failed experiment in genetic recombination. When you can clone yourself every twenty minutes, shattering the expected laws of Darwinian heredity merely adds spice to life.

Bacteria live anywhere damp. In water. In mud. In the air, as spores and on dust specks. In melting snow, in boiling volcanic springs. In the soil, in fantastic numbers. All over this planet's ecosystem, any liquid with organic matter, or any solid foodstuff with a trace of damp in it, anything not salted, mummified, pickled, poisoned, scorching hot or frozen solid, will swarm with bacteria if exposed to air. Unprotected food always spoils if it's left in the open. That's such a truism of our lives that it may seem like a law of physics, something like gravity or entropy; but it's no such thing, it's the relentless entrepreneurism of invisible organisms, who don't have our best interests at heart.

Bacteria live on and inside human beings. They always have; bacteria were already living on us long, long before our species became human. They creep onto us in the first instants in which we are held to our mother's breast. They live on us, and especially inside us, for as long as we live. And when we die, then other bacteria do their living best to recycle us.

An adult human being carries about a solid pound of commensal bacteria in his or her body; about a hundred trillion of them. Humans have a whole garden of specialized human-dwelling bacteria—tank-car E. coli, balloon-shaped staphylococcus, streptococcus, corynebacteria, micrococcus, and so on. Normally, these lurkers do us little harm. On the contrary, our normal human-dwelling bacteria run a kind of protection racket, monopolizing the available nutrients and muscling out other rival bacteria that might want to flourish at our expense in a ruder way.

But bacteria, even the bacteria that flourish inside us all our lives, are not our friends. Bacteria are creatures of an order vastly different from

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our own, a world far, far older than the world of multicellular mammals. Bacteria are vast in numbers, and small, and fetid, and profoundly unsympathetic.

So our tank car is whipping through its native ooze, shuddering from the jerky molecular impacts of Brownian motion, hunting for a chemotactic trail to some richer and filthier hunting ground, and periodically peeling off copies of itself. It's an enormously fast-paced and frenetic existence. Bacteria spend most of their time starving, because if they are well fed, then they double in number every twenty minutes, and this practice usually ensures a return to starvation in pretty short order. There are not a lot of frills in the existence of bacteria. Bacteria are extremely focussed on the job at hand. Bacteria make ants look like slackers.

And so it went in the peculiar world of our acquaintance the tank car, a world both primitive and highly sophisticated, both frenetic and utterly primeval. Until an astonishing miracle occurred. The miracle of "miracle drugs," antibiotics.

Sir Alexander Fleming discovered penicillin in 1928, and the power of the sulfonamides was recognized by drug company researchers in 1935, but antibiotics first came into general medical use in the 1940s and 50s. The effects on the hidden world of bacteria were catastrophic. Bacteria which had spent many contented millennia decimating the human race were suddenly and swiftly decimated in return. The entire structure of human mortality shifted radically, in a terrific attack on bacteria from the world of organized intelligence.

At the beginning of this century, back in the pre-antibiotic year of 1900, four of the top ten leading causes of death in the United States were bacterial. The most prominent were tuberculosis ("the white plague," *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*) and pneumonia (*Streptococcus pneumoniae, Pneumococcus*). The death rate in 1900 from gastroenteritis (*Escherichia coli*, various *Campylobacter* species, etc.) was higher than that for heart disease. The nation's number ten cause of death was diphtheria (*Corynebacterium diphtheriae*). Bringing up the bacterial van were gonorrhea, meningitis, septicemia, dysentery, typhoid fever, whooping cough, and many more.

At the end of the century, all of these festering bacterial afflictions (except pneumonia) had vanished from the top ten. They'd been replaced by heart disease, cancer, stroke,

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and even relative luxuries of postindustrial mortality, such as accidents, homicide and suicide. All thanks to the miracle of antibiotics.

Penicillin in particular was a chemical superweapon of devastating power. In the early heyday of penicillin, the merest trace of this substance entering a cell would make the hapless bacterium literally burst. This effect is known as "lysing."

Penicillin makes bacteria lyse because of a chemical structure called "beta-lactam." Beta-lactam is a four-membered cyclic amide ring, a molecular ring which bears a fatal resemblance to the chemical mechanisms a bacterium uses to build its cell wall.

Bacterial cell walls are mostly made from peptidoglycan, a plastic-like molecule chained together to form a tough, resilient network. A bacterium is almost always growing, repairing damage, or reproducing, so there are almost always raw spots in its cell wall that require construction work.

It's a sophisticated process. First, fragments of not-yet-peptided glycan are assembled inside the cytoplasm. Then the glycan chunks are hauled out to the cell wall by a chemical scaffolding of lipid carrier molecules, and they are fitted in place. Lastly, the peptidoglycan is busily knitted together by catalyzing enzymes and set to cure.

But beta-lactam is a spanner in the knitting-works, which attacks the enzyme which links chunks of peptidoglycan together. The result is like building a wall of bricks without mortar; the unlinked chunks of glycan break open under osmotic pressure, and the cell spews out its innards catastrophically, and dies.

Gram-negative bacteria, of the tank-car sort we have been describing, have a double cell wall, with an outer armor plus the inner cell membrane, rather like a rubber tire with an inner tube. They can sometimes survive a beta-lactam attack, if they don't leak to death. But gram-positive bacteria are more lightly built and rely on a single wall only, and for them a beta-lactam puncture is a swift kiss of death.

Beta-lactam can not only mimic, subvert and destroy the assembly enzymes, but it can even eat away peptide-chain mortar already in place. And since mammalian cells never use any peptidoglycans, they are never ruptured by penicillin (although penicillin does sometimes provoke serious allergic reactions in certain susceptible patients).

Pharmaceutical chemists rejoiced at this world-transforming discovery, and they began busily

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tinkering with beta-lactam products, discovering or producing all kinds of patentable, marketable, beta-lactam variants. Today there are more than fifty different penicillins and seventy-five cephalosporins, all of which use beta-lactam rings in one form or another.

The enthusiastic search for new medical miracles turned up substances that attack bacteria through even more clever methods. Antibiotics were discovered that could break up or jam up a cell's protein synthesis; drugs such as tetracycline, streptomycin, gentamicin, and chloramphenicol. These drugs creep through the porins deep inside the cytoplasm and lock onto the various vulnerable sites in the RNA protein factories. This RNA sabotage brings the cell's basic metabolism to a seething halt, and the bacterium chokes and dies.

The final major method of antibiotic attack was an assault on bacterial DNA. These compounds, such as the sulphonamides, the quinolones, and the diaminopyrimidines, would gum up bacterial DNA itself, or break its strands, or destroy the template mechanism that reads from the DNA and helps to replicate it. Or, they could ruin the DNA's nucleotide raw materials before those nucleotides could be plugged into the genetic code. Attacking bacterial DNA itself was the most sophisticated attack yet on bacteria, but unfortunately these DNA attackers often tended to be toxic to mammalian cells as well. So they saw less use. Besides, they were expensive.

In the war between species, humanity had found a full and varied arsenal. Antibiotics could break open cell walls, choke off the life-giving flow of proteins, and even smash or poison bacterial DNA, the central command and control center. Victory was swift, its permanence seemed assured, and the command of human intellect over the realm of brainless germs was taken for granted. The world of bacteria had become a commercial empire for exploitation by the clever mammals.

Antibiotic production, marketing and consumption soared steadily. Nowadays, about a hundred thousand tons of antibiotics are manufactured globally every year. It's a five billion dollar market. Antibiotics are cheap, far cheaper than time-consuming, labor-intensive hygienic cleanliness. In many countries, these miracle drugs are routinely retailed in job-lots as over-the-counter megadosage nostrums.

Nor have humans been the only mammals to benefit. For decades, antibiotics have been routinely fed to American livestock. Antibiotics

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are routinely added to the chow in vast cattle feedlots, and antibiotics are fed to pigs, even chickens. This practice goes on because a meat animal on antibiotics will put on poundage faster, and stay healthier, and supply the market with cheaper meat. Repeated protests at this practice by American health authorities have been successfully evaded in courts and in Congress by drug manufacturers and agro-business interests.

The runoff of tainted feedlot manure, containing millions of pounds of diluted antibiotics, enters rivers and watersheds where the world's free bacteria dwell.

In cities, municipal sewage systems are giant petri-dishes of diluted antibiotics and human-dwelling bacteria.

Bacteria are restless. They will try again, every twenty minutes. And they never sleep.

Experts were aware in the 1940s and 1950s that bacteria could, and would, mutate in response to selection pressure, just like other organisms. And they knew that bacteria went through many generations very rapidly, and that bacteria were very fecund. But it seemed that any bacteria would be very lucky to mutate to successfully resist even one antibiotic. Compounding that luck by evolving to resist two antibiotics at once seemed well-nigh impossible. Bacteria were at our mercy. They didn't seem any more likely to resist penicillin and tetracycline than a rainforest can resist bulldozers and chainsaws.

However, thanks to convenience and the profit motive, once-miraculous antibiotics had become a daily commonplace. A general chemical haze of antibiotic pollution spread across the planet. Titanic numbers of bacteria, in all niches of bacterial life, were being given an enormous number of chances to survive antibiotics.

Worse yet, bacteriologists were simply wrong about the way that bacteria respond to a challenge.

Bacteria will try anything. Bacteria don't draw hard and fast intellectual distinctions between their own DNA, a partner's DNA, DNA from another species, virus DNA, plasmid DNA, and food.

This property of bacteria is very alien to the human experience. If your lungs were damaged from smoking, and you asked your dog for a spare lung, and your dog, in friendly fashion, coughed up a lung and gave it to you, that would be quite an unlikely event. It would be even more miraculous if you could swallow a dog's lung and then breathe with it just fine, while your dog calmly grew

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himself a new one. But in the world of bacteria this kind of miracle is a commonplace.

Bacteria share enormous amounts of DNA. They not only share DNA among members of their own species, through conjugation and transduction, but they will encode DNA in plasmids and transposons and packet-mail it to other species. They can even find loose DNA lying around from the burst bodies of other bacteria, and they can eat that DNA like food and then make it work like information. Pieces of stray DNA can be swept all willy-nilly into the molecular syringes of viruses, and injected randomly into other bacteria. This fetid orgy isn't what Gregor Mendel had in mind when he was discovering the roots of classical genetic inheritance in peas, but bacteria aren't peas, and don't work like peas, and never have. Bacteria do extremely strange and highly inventive things with DNA, and if we don't understand or sympathize, that's not their problem, it's ours.

Some of the best and cleverest information-traders are some of the worst and most noxious bacteria. Such as *Staphylococcus* (boils). *Haemophilus* (ear infections). *Neisseria* (gonorrhea). *Pseudomonas* (abscesses, surgical infections). Even *Escherichia*, a very common human commensal bacterium.

When it comes to resisting antibiotics, bacteria are all in the effort together. That's because antibiotics make no distinctions in the world of bacteria. They kill, or try to kill, every bacterium they touch.

If you swallow an antibiotic for an ear infection, the effects are not confined to the tiny minority of toxic bacteria that happen to be inside your ear. Every bacterium in your body is assaulted, all hundred trillion of them. The toughest will not only survive, but they will carefully store, and sometimes widely distribute, the genetic information that allowed them to live.

The resistance from bacteria, like the attack of antibiotics, is a multipronged and sophisticated effort. It begins outside the cell, where certain bacteria have learned to spew defensive enzymes into the cloud of slime that surrounds them — enzymes called beta-lactamases, specifically adapted to destroy beta-lactam, and render penicillin useless. At the cell-wall itself, bacteria have evolved walls that are tougher and thicker, less likely to soak up drugs. Other bacteria have lost certain vulnerable porins, or have changed the shape of their porins so that antibiotics will be excluded instead of inhaled.

Inside the wall of the tank car,

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the resistance continues. Bacteria make permanent stores of beta-lactamases in the outer goo of periplasm, which will chew the drugs up and digest them before they ever reach the vulnerable core of the cell. Other enzymes have evolved that will crack or chemically smother other antibiotics.

In the pump-factories of the inner cell membrane, new pumps have evolved that specifically latch on to antibiotics and spew them back out of the cell before they can kill. Other bacteria have mutated their interior protein factories so that the assembly-line no longer offers any sabotage-sites for site-specific protein-busting antibiotics. Yet another strategy is to build excess production capacity, so that instead of two or three assembly lines for protein, a mutant cell will have ten or fifty, requiring ten or fifty times as much drug for the same effect. Other bacteria have come up with immunity proteins that will lock onto antibiotics and make them useless inert lumps.

Sometimes — rarely — a cell will come up with a useful mutation entirely on its own. The theorists of forty years ago were right when they thought that defensive mutations would be uncommon. But spontaneous mutation is not the core of the resistance at all. Far more often, a bacterium is simply let in on the secret through the exchange of genetic data.

Beta-lactam is produced in nature by certain molds and fungi; it was not invented from scratch by humans, but discovered in a petri dish. Beta-lactam is old, and it would seem likely that beta-lactamases are also very old.

Bacteriologists have studied only a few percent of the many microbes in nature. Even those bacteria that have been studied are by no means well understood. Antibiotic resistance genes may well be present in any number of different species, waiting only for selection pressure to manifest themselves and spread through the gene-pool.

If penicillin is sprayed across the biosphere, then mass death of bacteria will result. But any bug that is resistant to penicillin will swiftly multiply by millions of times, thriving enormously in the power-vacuum caused by the slaughter. The genes that gave the lucky winner its resistance will also increase by millions of times, becoming far more generally available. And there's worse: because often the resistance is carried by plasmids, and one single bacterium can contain as many as a thousand plasmids, and produce them and spread them at will.

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That genetic knowledge, once spread, will likely stay around a while. Bacteria don't die of old age. Bacteria aren't mortal in the sense that we understand mortality. Unless they are killed, bacteria just keep splitting and doubling. The same bacterial "individual" can spew copies of itself every twenty minutes, basically forever. After billions of generations, and trillions of variants, there are still likely to be a few random oldtimers around identical to ancestors from some much earlier epoch. Furthermore, spores of bacteria can remain dormant for centuries, then sprout in seconds and carry on as if nothing had happened. This gives the bacterial gene-pool — better described as an entire gene-ocean — an enormous depth and range. It's as if Eohippus could suddenly show up at the Kentucky Derby — and win.

It seems likely that many of the mechanisms of bacterial resistance were borrowed or kidnapped from bacteria that themselves produce antibiotics. The genus Streptomyces, which are filamentous, Gram-positive bacteria, are ubiquitous in the soil; in fact the characteristic "earthy" smell of fresh soil comes from Streptomyces' metabolic products. And Streptomyces bacteria produce a host of antibiotics, including streptomycin, tetracycline, neomycin, chloramphenicol, and erythromycin.

Human beings have been using streptomycin's antibiotic poisons against tuberculosis, gonorrhea, rickettsia, chlamydia, and candida yeast infection, with marked success. But in doing so, we have turned a small-scale natural process into a massive industrial one.

Streptomyces already has the secret of surviving its own poisons. So, presumably, do at least some of streptomyces's neighbors. If the poison is suddenly broadcast everywhere, through every niche in the biosphere, then word of how to survive it will also get around.

And when the gospel of resistance gets around, it doesn't come just one chapter at a time. Scarily, it tends to come in entire libraries. A resistance plasmid (familiarly known to researchers as "R-plasmids," because they've become so common) doesn't have to specialize in just one antibiotic. There's plenty of room inside a ring of plasmid DNA for handy info on a lot of different products and processes. Moving data on and off the plasmid is not particularly difficult. Bacterial scissors-and-zippers units known as "transposons" can knit plasmid DNA right into the central cell DNA — or they can transpose new knowledge onto a plasmid.

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These segments of loose DNA are aptly known as "cassettes."

So when a bacterium is under assault by an antibiotic, and it acquires a resistance plasmid from who knows where, it can suddenly find an entire arsenal of cassettes in its possession. Not just resistance to the one antibiotic that provoked the response, but a whole Bible of resistance to all the antibiotics lately seen in the local microworld.

Even more unsettling news has turned up in a lab report in the *Journal of Bacteriology* from 1993. Tetracycline-resistant strains in the bacterium Bacteroides have developed a kind of tetracycline reflex. Whenever tetracycline appears in the neighborhood, a Bacteroides transposon goes into overdrive, manufacturing R-plasmids at a frantic rate and then passing them to other bacteria in an orgy of sexual encounters a hundred times more frequent than normal. In other words, tetracycline itself now directly causes the organized transfer of resistance to tetracycline. As Canadian microbiologist Julian Davies commented in *Science* magazine (15 April 1994), "The extent and biochemical nature of this phenomenon is not well understood. A number of different antibiotics have been shown to promote plasmid transfer between different bacteria, and it might even be considered that some antibiotics are bacterial pheromones."

If this is the case, then our most potent chemical weapons have been changed by our lethal enemies into sexual aphrodisiacs.

The greatest battlegrounds of antibiotic warfare today are hospitals. The human race is no longer winning. Increasingly, to enter a hospital can make people sick. This is known as "nosocomial infection," from the Latin for hospital. About five percent of patients who enter hospitals nowadays pick up an infection from inside the hospital itself.

An epidemic of acquired immune deficiency has come at a particularly bad time, since patients without natural immunity are forced to rely heavily on megadosages of antibiotics. These patients come to serve as reservoirs for various highly resistant infections. So do patients whose immune systems have been artificially repressed for organ transplantion. The patients are just one aspect of the problem, though; healthy doctors and nurses show no symptoms, but they can carry strains of hospital superbug from bed to bed on their hands, deep in the pores of their skin, and in their nasal passages. Superbugs show up in food, fruit juices, bedsheets, even in bottles and buckets of antiseptics.

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The advent of antibiotics made elaborate surgical procedures safe and cheap; but nowadays half of nosocomial infections are either surgical infections, or urinary tract infections from contaminated catheters. Bacteria are attacking us where we are weakest and most vulnerable, and where their own populations are the toughest and most battle-hardened. From hospitals, resistant superbugs travel to old-age homes and day-care centers, predating on the old and the very young.

Staphylococcus aureus, a common hospital superbug which causes boils and ear infections, is now present in super-strains highly resistant to every known antibiotic except vancomycin. Enterococcus is resistant to vancomycin, and it has been known to swap genes with staphylococcus. If staphylococcus gets hold of this resistance information, then staph could become the first bacterial superhero of the post-antibiotic era, and human physicians of the twenty-first century would be every bit as helpless before it as were physicians of the 19th. In the 19th century physicians dealt with septic infection by cutting away the diseased flesh and hoping for the best.

Staphylococcus often lurks harmlessly in the nose and throat. *Staphylococcus epidermis*, a species which lives naturally on human skin, rarely causes any harm, but it too must battle for its life when confronted with antibiotics. This harmless species may serve as a reservoir of DNA data for the bacterial resistance of other, truly lethal bacteria. Certain species of staph cause boils, others impetigo. Staph attacking a weakened immune system can kill, attacking the lungs (pneumonia) and brain (meningitis). Staph is thought to cause toxic shock syndrome in women, and toxic shock in post-surgical patients.

A 1994 outbreak of an especially virulent strain of the common bactevium Streptococcus, "necrotizing fasciitis," caused panic headlines in Britain about "flesh-eating germs" and "killer bugs." Of the fifteen reported victims so far, thirteen have died.

A great deal has changed since the 1940s and 1950s. Strains of bacteria can cross the planet with the speed of jet travel, and populations of humans — each with their hundred trillion bacterial passengers — mingle as never before. Old-fashioned public-health surveillance programs, which used to closely study any outbreak of bacterial disease, have been

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dismantled, or put in abeyance, or are underfunded. The seeming triumph of antibiotics has made us careless about the restive conquered population of bacteria.

Drug companies treat the standard antibiotics as cash cows, while their best-funded research efforts currently go into antiviral and antifungal compounds. Drug companies follow the logic of the market; with hundreds of antibiotics already cheaply available, it makes little commercial sense to spend millions developing yet another one. And the market is not yet demanding entirely new antibiotics, because the resistance has not quite broken out into full-scale biological warfare. And drug research is expensive and risky. A hundred million dollars of investment in antibiotics can be wiped out by a single point-mutation in a resistant bacterium.

We did manage to kill off the smallpox virus, but none of humanity's ancient bacterial enemies are extinct. They are all still out there, and they all still kill people. Drug companies mind their cash flow, health agencies become complaisant, people mind what they think is their own business, but bacteria never give up. Bacteria have learned to chew up, spit out, or shield themselves from any and every drug we can throw at them. They can now defeat every technique we have. The only reason true disaster hasn't broken out is because all bacteria can't all defeat all the techniques all at once. Yet.

There have been no major conceptual breakthroughs lately in the antibiotic field. There has been some encouraging technical news, with new techniques such as rational drug design and computer-assisted combinatorial chemistry. There may be entirely new miracle drugs just over the horizon that will fling the enemy back once again, with enormous losses. But on the other hand, there may well not be. We may already have discovered all the best antibiotic tricks available, and squandered them in a mere fifty years.

Anyway, now that the nature of their resistance is better understood, no bacteriologist is betting that any new drug can foil our ancient enemies for very long. Bacteria are better chemists than we are and they don't get distracted.

If the resistance triumphs, it does not mean the outbreak of universally lethal plagues or the end of the human race. It is not an apocalyptic problem. What it would really mean — probably — is a slow return, over decades, to the pre-antibiotic bacterial status-quo. A return to the bacte-

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rial status-quo of the nineteenth century.

For us, the children of the miracle, this would mean a truly shocking decline in life expectancy. Infant mortality would become very high; it would once again be common for parents to have five children and lose three. It would mean a return to epidemic flags, quarantine camps, tubercular sanatariums, and leprosariums.

Cities without good sanitation —mostly Third World cities—would suffer from water-borne plagues such as cholera and dysentery. Tuberculosis would lay waste the underclass around the world. If you cut yourself at all badly, or ate spoiled food, there would be quite a good chance that you would die. Childbirth would be a grave septic risk for the mother.

The practice of medicine would be profoundly altered. Elaborate, high-tech surgical procedures, such as transplants and prosthetic implants, would become extremely risky. The expense of any kind of surgery would soar, since preventing infection would be utterly necessary but very tedious and difficult. A bad heart would be a bad heart for life, and a shattered hip would be permanently disabling. Health-care budgets would be consumed by antiseptic and hygienic programs.

Life without contagion and infection would seem as quaintly exotic as free love in the age of AIDS. The decline in life expectancy would become just another aspect of broadly diminishing cultural expectations in society, economics, and the environment. Life in the developed world would become rather pinched, wary, and nasty, while life in the overcrowded human warrens of the megalopolitan Third World would become an abattoir.

If this all seems gruesomely plausible, it's because that's the way our ancestors used to live all the time. It's not a dystopian fantasy; it was the miracle of antibiotics that was truly fantastic. If that miracle died away, it would merely mean an entirely natural return to the normal balance of power between humanity and our invisible predators.

At the close of this century, antibiotic resistance is one of the gravest threats that confronts the human race. It ranks in scope with overpopulation, nuclear disaster, destruction of the ozone, global warming, species extinction and massive habitat destruction. Although it gains very little attention in comparison to those other horrors, there is nothing theoretical or speculative about antibiotic resistance. The mere fact that we can't see it happening doesn't

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mean that it's not taking place. It is occurring, stealthily and steadily, in a world which we polluted drastically before we ever took the trouble to understand it.

We have spent billions to kill bacteria but mere millions to truly comprehend them. In our arrogance, we have gravely underestimated our enemy's power and resourcefulness. Antibiotic resistance is a very real threat which is well documented and increasing at considerable speed. In its scope and its depth and the potential pain and horror of its implications, it may be the greatest single menace that we human beings confront — besides, of course, the steady increase in our own numbers. And if we don't somehow resolve our grave problems with bacteria, then bacteria may well resolve that population problem for us.

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Michael Swanwick has called Ian MacLeod "the first important new writer of the '90s." Certainly Ian is one of the most interesting. His short fiction has appeared in Asimov's, Interzone, Pulphouse, Amazing *and* Weird Tales. *Ian's work has appeared in* F&SF *as well, most recently in our May 1994 issue.*

"Tirkiluk" is the first of two covers Ian's stories have inspired. The second will appear later this year. "Tirkiluk" came into being after Ian read "Body of Lies" by Anthony Cave Brown. The book, which deals with Allied deception and intelligence operations in World War II, has a section about the "weather wars." The idea of using the natural elements as part of the conflict so intrigued Ian that he simply had to build a story around it. What follows is one of the most vividly imagined cold weather tales we have ever read.

Tirkiluk

By Ian R. MacLeod

RADIO TRANSMISSION FROM *Queen of Erin* via Lerwick to Meteorological Intelligence, Godalming.

Confirm Science Officer Seymour disembarked Logos II Weatherbase Tuiak Bay July 28. Science Officer Cayman boarded in adequate health. No enemy activity sighted. Visibility good. Wind force 4 east veering north. Clear sea. Returning.

Noon, July 29th, 1942

Stood watching on the shingle as the *Queen of Erin* lifted anchor and steamed south. I really don't feel alone. The gulls were screaming and wheeling, the seabirds were crowding the rocks and just as the *Queen* finally vanished around the headland, the huge gray gleaming back of a whale broke from the water barely two hundred yards from the shore, crashing in billows of spray and steam. I take it as a sign of welcome.

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Evening, August 2nd

Have been giving the main and backup generators a thorough overhaul. Warm enough to work outside the hut in shirtsleeves — but you only have to look around to see what winter will bring. The mountains north of this valley look as though they've been here forever, and the glacier nosing between down from the icefields is just too big to believe. It's twenty miles off, and I can barely span it with my outstretched hand. Feel very small.

Noon, August 3rd

Spent a dreadful night on the bunk as the blackfly and mosquito insect bites began to swell and itch. The itching has gone now, but I'm covered in scabs and weeping sores. Hope that nothing gets infected.

Evening, August 6th

Wish I'd had more of a chance to talk with Frank Cayman before we exchanged, but there were all the technical details to go over, and the supplies to unload. He did tell me he was part of a Cambridge expedition to Patagonia in 1935, which, like my own brief pre-war experience with the solar eclipse over South Orkneys, was seen as proof of aptitude for maintaining an Arctic weather station. He's a geologist — but then the pre-war specializations of the Science Officers I met at Godalming made no sense, either. Odd to think that many of us are scattered across the Arctic in solitary huts now, or freezing and rocking through the storms on some tiny converted trawler. Of the two — and after my experience of the *Queen of Erin*, and the all-pervading reek of rancid herring — I think I'm glad I was posted on dry ground.

Frank Cayman looked healthy enough, anyway, apart from that frostbitten nose. But he was so *very* quiet. Not subdued, but just drawn in on himself. Was impressed at the start with how neat he's left everything here, but now I can see that there is no other option. You have to be organized.

Evening, August 9th

My call-sign response from Godalming is Capella, that bright G-type sister of the sun. It means, as I expected, that Kay Alexander is my Monitoring Officer. Funny to think of her, sitting there with her headphones in that drafty hut by the disused tennis courts, noting down these bleeps I send out on the cypher grid. An odd kind of intimacy: without speech transmissions, and

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with usually just a curt coded reply of Message Received (no point in crowding the airwaves). Find that I'm re-reading the two requests I've received for more specific cloud data, as though Kay would do anything more than encode and relay them, chewing her pencil and pushing back strands of red hair.

Too late for regrets now. And at the moment I miss the stars more than the people, to be honest. Even at midnight, the sky is so pearly bright that I can barely make out the major constellations. But that will change.

Evening, August 12th

A great bull seal came up onto the beach this morning as I was laying out my washing on the rocks to dry. Whiskered, with huge battle-scarred tusks, he really did look like something out of Lewis Carroll. Think we both saw each other at about the same time. He looked at me, and I looked at him. I stumbled back toward the hut, and he turned at speed and lumbered back into the waves. I'm not sure which of us was more frightened.

Evening, August 30th

Really must record what I get up to each day.

I'm usually awake at 7:30, and prime the stove and breakfast at eight. Slop out afterward, then read from my already dwindling supply of unread books until nine. After that, I have to go out and read the instruments. Twelve-hour wind speed, direction, min and max temperature, air pressure, precipitation, cloud height and formation, visibility, sea conditions, frequency and size of any sighted icebergs — have to do this here at the hut, and then halfway up the valley at the poetically named Point B.

Every other day, if conditions permit, I also have to send up the balloon. On those days — lugging the gas canisters and getting the lines straight, then hauling it all in again — there's time for little else before evening, when I have to read off all the measurements here and then trudge up to Point B again. On the alternate days, there's all the domestic trivia of living. Cooking, cleaning, washing, collecting water from the river, scraping off the gray mold that keeps growing on the walls of this hut. Then I have to encode the information and prime up the generator so that valves are warmed and ready to transmit at nineteen hundred hours local time. Then dinner, and try as I might the tins and dry reheated blocks all taste the same.

Then listen to the BBC, if the atmosphere is reflecting the signals my

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way. Thought the radio would be more of a comfort than it actually is. Those fading voices talking about cafés and trains and air-raids make me feel more alone than gazing out of the window ever does.

September 10th

Saw another human being today. I knew that there are Eskimos in this region, but when you get here everything seems so vast and — empty isn't the word, because the sea and the valley are teeming with birds and I've glimpsed caribou, foxes, what might have been musk oxen, and hare — *unhuman*, I suppose. But there it is. I'm not alone.

Was up at Point B, taking the morning measurements. Point B is a kind of rocky platform, with a drop on one side down to the valley floor and the river from which I gather my water plunging over the rocks, and ragged cliffs rising in a series of grass-tufted platforms on the other. I heard a kind of grunting sound. I looked up, expecting an animal, fearing, in fact, my first encounter with a polar bear. But instead, a squat human figure was outlined on the clifftop, looking down at me, plaits of hair blowing in the wind, a rifle strapped to his back. In a moment, he stepped out of sight.

Frank Cayman told me that he hadn't seen any Eskimos, but he showed me on the map where there were signs of a campground. The tribes here are nomadic, and my feeling is that they must be returning to this area after some time away, probably stocking up with meat on the high plains below the glacier before moving south as the winter darkness rolls in.

They're likely to be used to seeing white men — the Arctic Ocean was a thriving whaling and fishing-ground before the war — but I was warned at Godalming to be very wary of them. Was told that Eskimos are thieving, diseased, immoral, not averse to selling information to the skipper of any stray German sub, etc., etc.

I suppose I should keep my head down, and padlock my hut and supply shed every time I go out. But now that I know I'm not alone, I think I might try to meet them.

September 14th

A long, long day, and the preternatural darkness that fills the air now that the clouds are moving in and the sun is sliced for so long by the horizon gives the whole exploit a weird sense of dream.

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I found the Eskimo encampment. It lies a little west of the place Frank Cayman showed me on the map, and was easily visible once I'd climbed north beyond Point B out of the valley from the rising smoke at the edge of the boggy land before the mountains. It's only about ten miles off, but it took me most of six hours to get there, and my boots and leggings were sodden.

No igloos, of course, but it was still odd to see Eskimos living in what looks remarkably like a red Indian encampment from an American western movie, and even more so because peatsmoke and the dimming light gave the whole place a sort of cinematic grainy black-and-whiteness.

Was unprepared for the smell, especially inside the tent of caribou skin and hollowed earth that I was taken into. Seem to regard urine as a precious commodity. They use it for tanning — which is understandable — but also to wash their hair. But for all that, I was made welcome enough when I squelched toward the camp yelling "Teyma!" (Peace — one of the few Eskimo words I can remember) although the children prodded me and the dogs growled and barked. A man called Unluku, one of the elders, could speak good English — with a colorful use of language he'd learned from the whalers. He told me that they knew about my hut, and that they didn't mind my being there because I wasn't eating their caribou or their seals. Also asked him what they knew about the war. Stroking the head of a baby who sat suckling on his mother's lap beside him, he said they knew that kaboola — whiteman — was killing himself. They strike me as a decent people; strange and smelly and mercurial, but content with their lives.

September 15th

Rereading my encounter with the Eskimos, I don't think I've really conveyed their sense of otherness, strangeness.

The liquefying, maggoty carcasses of several caribou had been left at the edge of the campground, seemingly to rot, although I gathered that this was their store of food. And, although the people looked generally plump and cheerful, there was one figure squatting in the middle of the rough ring of tents, roped to a whalebone stake. The children would occasionally scoop up a pile of dog excrement and throw it at him, and Unluku took the trouble to walk over and aim a loose kick. He said the figure was Inua, which I assumed to be some kind of criminal or scapegoat, although tried to look it up, and the closest I can come is a kind of shaman. Perhaps it was just his name. I don't

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know, and the sense that I got from those Eskimos was that I never could.

September 20th

Supply ship came this morning — the *Tynwald*. Was expecting her sometime today or tomorrow. I was given a few much-read and out-of-date copies of the *Daily Mirror*, obviously in the expectation that I would want to know how the world and the war and Jane are getting on. And more food, and spare lanterns, and a full winter's supply of oil. And fresh circulars from Godalming, including one about the pilfering of blotting paper.

Stood and watched the ship turn around the headland. Say they'll probably manage to get back one more time before the route between the islands becomes impassable. Already, I'm losing the names and faces.

October 1st

Looking out through the hut window now. Venus is shining through the teeth of white mountains in the halo of the sun where the wind shrieks and growls, and the Milky Way twines like a great river across the deep blue sky, striated by bands of interstellar dust, clearer than I've ever seen before.

I seem to have come a long way, just to make some sense of my life.

October 12th

The Eskimo encampment is gone. Climbed up from Point B to the edge of the valley this morning when the full moon was shining, and my old pre-war Zeiss binoculars could make everything out through the clear sharp air.

No moon now. The edge of the sky is a milky shade in the corner that hides the sun, and the wind is up to force 6. There were snow flurries yesterday, but somehow their absence today makes everything all the more ominous.

October 16th

Three days of dreadful weather — only managed one trip up to Point B, and the balloon was out of the question.

Then this. Been out for hours, slowly freezing, totally entranced by Aurora Borealis, the Northern Lights. Like curtains of silk drawn across the sky. A faintly hissing waterfall of light. Shifting endlessly. Yet vast. There are no words.

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I think of charged particles streaming from the sun, swirling around the earth's magnetic field. Even the science sounds half-magical. I must —

An interruption. A clatter outside by the storage shed that sounded too purposeful to be just the wind. And the door was open — forced — flapping to and fro. Must say I felt afraid, standing there with the wind screaming around me in the flickering auroral half light. I've re-fixed it now (cut my thumb, but not badly) and I've got the little .22 rifle beside me as I sit at this desk, as though that would be any use. But must say I feel lonely and afraid, as these great hissing curtains of light sway across the sky beyond my window.

But — being practical — it simply means that some of the Eskimos haven't gone south, and that they have light fingers (although I can't find anything missing) just as I was warned by the trainers at Godalming. Suppose this is my first real test.

October 20th

Out today in better weather taking readings in the pallid light before my fingers froze, I saw a ragged human figure about quarter of a mile down the freezing beach. I assume this must be my Eskimo-thief. Once I'd seen him, somehow didn't feel afraid.

Went down along the beach afterward. I made out a gray lump in the darkness that the waves were pushing up the shore. It was the body of a *long*-dead seal — not something that I would ever like to consider eating, although from the fresh rents and the stinking spillage over the rocks this was obviously exactly what the figure had been doing.

Was he *that* desperate, or, in view of the rotting caribou I saw at the campground, am I still stuck in the irrelevant values of a distant civilization? Was always impressed by the story of those Victorian polar explorers like Franklin, who ended up eating each other and dying in a landscape that the Eskimos lived off and regarded as home.

But still, I feel sorry for my Eskimo-thief, and am even tempted to put something outside the hut and see what happens, although I'm probably just going to attract the white wolves or foxes, or the bears. It might seem like an act of foolishness, but more likely it stems from gratitude toward my Eskimo-

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thief, and for the fact that I don't feel quite as afraid or alone any longer.

October 22

My Eskimo-thief is squatting in the hut with me now. Eating, I have to say, like a dog. There's a gale howling, and alarming drifts of snow. Easily the worst weather so far. He was hauling himself across the beach on hands and knees, crusted in ice, trying to grab a broken-winged tern. He still hasn't spoken. His clothes are filthy, moulting caribou hair all over the hut, and he looks almost a child. Very young.

I think he was probably the figure I saw roped to the whalebone stake, which I suppose means that he must be some kind of criminal or scapegoat. The tribe has obviously moved south and left him behind. I recall the stories of how the Eskimo are supposed to leave their ill, elderly, and unwanted outside in winter for the cold and the wolves to finish off.

He wants more. If he can devour unheated pemmican like this, he must be very hungry.

But he can't be too ill.

Evening

I've made a stupid assumption. My Eskimo-thief is a woman.

October 24

The storm has died down. The twilight is deepening but I still get the sun for a few hours around noon and the bay as yet hasn't iced over.

My Eskimo-thief is called Tirkiluk. I discovered her sex when, after she'd finally finished eating, she pulled down the saucepan from over the stove with some effort, unwound her furs and squatted over it to urinate. She's terribly malnourished. Painfully bare ribs, a swollen belly.

October 27

Hard to tell under all those layers of fur, but Tirkiluk seems to be improving. She still mostly wanders up and down the ashen shore muttering to herself, or sits rocking on her haunches under a sort of awning that she's rigged up in front of the hut out of canvas from the supply shed and driftwood from the shore. Did I really save her life? Was she abandoned by the tribe? Was I just interfering?

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October 29

The supply ship came today. *The Silverdale Glen.* Tirkiluk started shrieking Kaboola!, and I ran out from the hut and saw the red and green lights bobbing out in the bay. Thought for one odd moment that the stars were moving.

I got many knowing looks from the sailors when they saw Tirkiluk sitting on a rock down the beach. Many of them fished these waters before the war, and of course there are the stories about Eskimo wives being offered as a gesture of hospitality. So, and despite her appearance, the crew of the *Silverdale Glen* assume that I've taken Tirkiluk to comfort me through the months of Arctic night, and I know that any attempts at denial would have been counterproductive.

They've gone now, and I'm alone for the winter. It's likely as not, I suppose, that word of Tirkiluk will get back to Godalming.

November 1

Went out to collect water this morning. The storm of the past few days has died entirely, and waves are sluggish, black as Chinese lacquer. Down on the shore, discovered that the water around the rocky inlet where the river discharges has formed a crust of ice. You can almost feel the temperature dropping, the ancient weight of the dark paleocrystic ice cap bearing down through the mountains, the weather changing, turning, tightening, notch by notch by notch. Soon, I think, the whole bay will freeze over.

Tirkiluk still sits outside.

November 6

Tirkiluk and I are making some progress in our attempts to converse. Her language bears little resemblance to the Inuit I was taught, although she's surprisingly adept at picking up English. Often, as I try to explain what the place I come from is like, and about the war and my monitoring of the weather, or when she describes the myths and rovings and bickerings of her tribe, we meet halfway. Don't think anyone who ever heard would understand a word of it, and a great deal of it is still lost between us. She seems to speak with affection for the tribe, and ignores my attempts to discover why she was left here when they moved on.

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November 12

The bay is now solid ice, and the weather has cleared. Earlier, I stood outside with Tirkiluk, pointing out the brightest stars, the main constellations, naked-eye binaries. She recognized many stellar objects herself, and gave them names — and myths or stories that were too complex for our pidgin conversation to convey. The Inuit are deeply familiar with the night sky.

Everything is incredibly clear, although somehow the idea of measurement and observation seems out of place. There's an extraordinary sense of depth to the Arctic sky. Really sense the distance between the stars.

One of the oddest things for me is the almost circular movement of the heavens, and the loss in the low horizon of stars like Alkiad, although in this dazzling darkness, many others have been gained. Counted fourteen stars in the Pleiades when my usual record is eleven, and Mu Cephei glows like a tiny coal. There is still *some* degree tilt to the stellar horizon. Aquila (which Tirkiluk calls Aagyuuk and has some significance for her that she tries to but can't explain) has now set entirely.

November 20

The gales have returned, and Tirkiluk and I now share the hut. Much to her puzzlement, have rigged up one of the canvas awnings across the roof beam, which makes for two very awkward spaces instead of a single moderately awkward one. She sleeps curled up on a rug on the floor. When I lie awake listening to the wind and the ice in the bay groaning, can hear her softly snoring.

November 22

Must say that, despite reservations about her personal habits, I welcome her company, although I realize that I came here fully expecting — and wanting — to be left on my own. But she doesn't intrude, which I suppose comes from living close to many other people in those stinking little tents. We can go for hours without speaking, one hardly noticing that the other is there, so in a sense I don't feel that I really have lost my solitude. Then at other times, we both become so absorbed in the slow process of communication that yesterday I forgot to go out and knock the ice off the transmitter wires, and nearly missed the evening transmission.

She told me an Inuit story about the sun and the moon, who came down

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to earth and played "dousing the lights" — a self-explanatory Inuit sex-game of the kind that so shocked the early missionaries. But the sun and the moon are brother and sister, and in the steamy darkness of an Eskimo hut, they unwittingly broke the incest taboo. So when the lamps were re-lit, the moon in his shame smeared his face with lantern soot, and the sun set herself alight with lantern oil, and the two of them ran out across the sky, where they still chase each other to this day, yet never dare to meet. It all seemed so poetic — and the story was such an effort for Tirkiluk to get out — that I didn't attempt to ask what happens when there's an eclipse.

November 28

This morning, took a shovel from outside to clear a way through the crystal drift that half-covers the supply shed. Hands were bare, and the freezing metal stuck to my skin. In stupid panic, I ripped a big flap of skin off my palm. I staggered back out of the gale into the hut, dripping blood, grabbing the medicine box and trying to open it one-handed. But Tirkiluk made me sit down, and licked the wound — which was oddly soothing — breathing over it, muttering what I imagine is some incantation, making me stretch my fingers. The weirdest thing is that it hardly hurts at all now, and seems to be healing already. But I've dosed it in iodine, just to be safe.

December 1

Hand almost completely healed.

Better weather — the low cirrus sky glows with an odd light that could be the hidden moon or refracted from the sun or even the Northern Lights. Tirkiluk and I went out walking along the flat glistening bay. With her encouragement, I took out the .22 rifle, and had a lucky shot at a seal that was lying on the ice. The bullet was too small to kill it, but Tirkiluk ran over to the creature as it lumbered around, apparently too lost or dazed to find its airhole, and slit it wide open with the bone-handled knife she always carries. Blood and hot offal spewed everywhere, dark as ink, and the flanks quivered and those big dark eyes still stared as she proceeded to eat the steaming liver, offering it to me to share.

Somehow, I would never have considered killing any of the local wildlife without Tirkiluk. But with her, and despite the churning in my stomach, it seemed oddly right. Against Tirkiluk's protest, I have lugged the carcass back

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to the hut and left it outside to freeze. Did have plans to try to cook it, but now I'm just wondering how I'll ever get rid of it in the spring.

December 2

Needn't have worried. I was woken last night by a shuffling and grunting outside the hut, and by Tirkiluk's smelly hand pressed hard across my mouth to make sure I stayed silent. We crept to the window together and cleared a small space in the dirty crust of ice. There was a polar bear, dragging off the carcass of the seal. An incredible beast. Know now why Tirkiluk didn't want me to drag the seal back to the hut. And understand the Inuit word ilira, which is the awe which accompanies fear.

December 7

Looking back at this journal, I see that I imagined Tirkiluk's name was Inua when I saw her at the campground. She tells me now that Inua is actually some fingerless hag who lives at the bottom of the sea, although she can't or won't explain why there should be any connection with her.

December 13

Beyond the edge of the bay, hidden in a steep ravine that I must have walked past many times without even noticing, Tirkiluk has shown me a place of bones. Somehow, the ice and snow hardly settle there. Thought at first that it was simply a place where unwary caribou and musk oxen had fallen and died over the years, but to my horror, and in the eerie light of a clear moon, I saw that there were many human skulls amongst the rocks.

Said her tribe has several places like this, where they leave their dead. I suppose there's little chance of burial with the ground frozen for almost half the year, and any bodies left out would be dragged away like my seal. But she's matter-of-fact about it. She kept pointing and saying something about herself, and repeating bits of the story of "dousing the lights," and the sun and the moon. There's some message I don't understand.

December 18

Understand now why Tirkiluk was abandoned. Discovery is of far more than academic curiosity. Hardly know where to begin.

Have seen her semi-naked a few times. She doesn't exactly wash herself,

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but she goes through an elaborate process of scraping her skin clean with her knife. Although I've tried hard not to look at this and other aspects of her toilet, it's difficult to have something like that going on in the hut — usually accompanied by her rambling half-spoken songs — without taking notice. She's put on some weight, but I'd assumed until now that the continued swelling in her belly was a by-product of earlier malnutrition. Now, I realize the significance of the sun and moon incest story that she keeps telling, and the reason why she was thrown out of the tribe.

Tirkiluk is heavily pregnant, by a half-brother named Iquluut. Think he was the hunter I saw looking down at me from Point B all those weeks ago. He's a senior in the tribe, twice her age, and apparently as the male he's regarded as blameless in the liaison, even by Tirkiluk herself. I shouldn't try to judge, but I know that in many ways the Inuit treat their women badly. A "good" wife is regarded as being worth slightly less than a decent team of dogs, and a "bad" one is unceremoniously dumped. And love doesn't come into the Inuit way of life at all, although lust — male, and female — certainly does.

But there's nothing I can do about all this. Winter has closed in, and Tirkiluk and I are stuck together like Siamese twins in this hut. Just hope she can find a better life with some other tribe in the spring — although she says she'll have to travel what she regards as impossibly far to reach any of her people who will take her. Have to see if I can't wrangle her a passage down to one of the southern ports on the supply boat when it finally comes in the spring, although I saw enough of "westernized" Eskimo life around the docks at Neimaagen not to wish it on anyone. Least of all Tirkiluk.

December 19

Have looked in all the reference books I've been provided with, and wasn't surprised to find that there was no guidance about childbirth. Can't bring myself to radio Godalming for advice. Not sure whether that's pride, or the certainty that they wouldn't respond.

Christmas Day —

and I've opened the bottle of rum that I've been saving until now. Tirkiluk spluttered and spat out the first sip, but then a wide grin spread across her broad face, and she held out her cup and asked for more. Eskimos are obviously used to drink. Think, in fact, that she's holding it better than I am.

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Did my best this morning to tell the Nativity story — very appropriate in the circumstances. Tirkiluk knows all about Christian heaven and hell. She thinks hell is a warm place where only whiteman is allowed to go. Can think of worse places than hell. Even now, in the cheery glow that comes from the drink and the light of the stove and the lanterns, the cold penetrates easily through the triple insulated walls of this hut, and a sense of damp chill slides like an embrace around your back and into your bones. You can never escape it. As far as I can tell from talking to Tirkiluk and rereading the books, the Inuit don't believe in an afterlife. The spirits just drift and return, drift and return.

Even today, the war must go on. Both trekked up to Point B to take measurements from the few instruments that haven't frozen solid. The wind was biting, driven with gravel-like ice, but I taught her Once In Royal's David's City as we felt our way in the wild gray darkness. Somehow managed to sing, even though had to turn our heads away from the wind just to breathe.

Could stand my frozen beaverskin coat up on its own like a suit of armor when we returned to the hut, and somehow it made an odd, dark presence. I think of that line about "the other that walks beside you" in *The Waste Land*, and Shackleton's account of that terrible final climb over the mountains of South Georgia. Tirkiluk's matted and moulting furs work far better, although that's probably simply because it's she who wears them.

Lost the blood from my right foot entirely today, and after nearly roasting the dead white flesh on top of the stove, gave in to Tirkiluk and let her hold it and rub it against her hard round belly, clicking the odd-shaped stones and polar bear teeth that she has strung around her neck. For the first time in my life — and in the oddest imaginable circumstances — I felt a baby kick. But, as usual, she muttered some incantation, and as usual, it seemed to work.

I've just radioed Godalming, was rather hoping for more than the usual Message Received code I got in return.

Godalming no transmission stopped No ship for months Must live with this pa

Leave my possessions to my beloved Mother in the ho

Strong enough to keep record now. Important if things turn for worst. No

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excuse for it. My clumsiness. Not Tirkiluk. Stupid accident. I was drunk. The lantern went over. Should have gone out. But lid was loose. My fault. Idiot. Flaming oil. Everywhere.

Tirkiluk and I are sheltering by a wall of rock and of drift-ice, with what remains of one wall of the supply hut for a roof. The fire was terrible. Much worse in this cold place. The wind so strong. It and the flames fueling each other. Supply hut went up too. Gas canisters. The oil drums. The lanterns. Explosions. Nearly killed. Everything.

Easier to list what we do have. Thought to drag out our clothing before too late. Some of the bedding. Some canvas. Managed to get back in and save some food, not enough to last the winter. Tirkiluk breaks the cans open with her knife. Contents are ice. No way of warming them. Eskimos carry fire with them through the winter. A tribe's greatest treasure.

Beam of roof fell. Hit my legs. Tirkiluk's all right but can hardly walk and there's the baby. Haven't moved for don't know how. Cold incredible to start with there's no pain no cold now. Fever, then this. Can't feel my legs. Graphite breaks and paper is brittle, but if I'm slow writing is easy.

Can watch the stars turn. Everything freezing. Ice drifts through gaps in canvas and roof like smoke. Place stinks of us and the flames. Remember Tirkiluk now. How she healed me. Chanting, salt ice on my lips, teeth chattering. The hard cold holding me in white bony arms. Lights in the sky. Other lights. Could feel the spirits, whispering, gathering round. Smoke and ice. Cold breath. Their names tumbling on the wind. So many, so old. Wizened faces. The spirits don't mind the cold. This is their home. I don't belong. I leave my bones in a quiet place where the wolves can't get them.

Scratches of light. January meteors The Quadrantids. Izar a dark binary. I'm freezing. I don't feel cold. Dreamed that Tirkiluk had lost her fingers. Snapped off like icicles. She was Inua, fingerless hag, muttering under dark ice in the depths of the ocean.

Tirkiluk is near her term. Tells me everything in her own language, and now I understand. Our lips are frozen as we speak, but perhaps the truth of

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it is in our minds. She tells me that she can't move now and that the bleeding is coming and that she and the baby will die.

The tins are useless. Need proper food. Water too. Must make the effort. Foolish kaboola whiteman with my own bare hands. Must try.

Small victory today, but think we now have a chance.

Went out onto the ice with a spear fashioned from hooked and sharpened transmitter strut, aerial cable for a line. No bleeding. Legs gave way once, but otherwise no problem. Knelt down and licked and scraped the new ice with my bared teeth, tasting the salt that is still in it. Thickness impossible to judge by sight alone, but taste is a clue. At the thinnest point lies a clear circle of water, and a tiny ridge of ice around it that seal-breath has made. The ridge tells who and when and how many have used it.

Crouched down. Waited. Time froze over. Just me and the hole in the ice and the cold stiffening my clothes and the mountains like the shoulders of the gods behind me and stars turning in the endless glowing darkness. Silence was incredible. Silence is the thing that's struck me most since the burning of the hut. Always associated fear with noise. But fear is silence, and if you face the silence and listen to it and go through it, you eventually come to a dark place of deeper peace, like diving into that black circle of water as I wait for the seal, becoming part of everything. Found I could stop my breathing, and the slow ragged thump of my heart. Felt I was no longer real yet knew I would snap back into existence when the seal surfaced to breathe.

Over in an instant. Thought of Tirkiluk. Felt no hesitation, no pity. The grunt and gust of salt air, a face like a dog's. Drove the spear down hard, and felt the shock of it strike back into my body. It began to thrash and pull, but the line held, and the sea turned foamy red. Felt the ice cracking and the ocean bubbling up as I heaved it out. Frozen splashes. Somehow found the energy to haul the seal back to Tirkiluk, the heat of it sliding in my hands. She sliced and bit and tore. The way she did before, when I was so disgusted. She offered it to me. I took a little, and the taste of it was good. But all hunger seems to have left me, and even the fresh water she lifted from the gray sack in the seal's belly slaked a thirst I didn't feel.

She made me take the bladder back to the bloodied hole. Dragged it there somehow, partly on hands and knees. It floated, a wounded sack, then was drawn down by a rippling current. Suddenly alive, swam away into the

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darkness. Tirkiluk tells me the spirit has returned. There will now be seal to hunt again.

Such terrible guilt about the stupidity of the accident. Not just my own life and Tirkiluk's I've endangered. The weather has turned even more against us now, as though it knows, and we've packed the snow around to make walls — a rudimentary kind of igloo, although Tirkiluk didn't even know the word. The wind bites though, threatening to excavate or bury us. Can feel the great anticyclone the icecap inland like a presence, a ghostly conjurer drawing gales out of the Arctic waters. And I think of the lonely men in huts like the one I destroyed, or the convoys in the Atlantic, and rounding the terrible North Cape toward Murmansk.

Cold here is quite incredible, yet Tirkiluk feels it more than me. Almost a blessing. Looked at my legs today, cut back leggings that snapped like stiff card. Black skin, a section of dirty white where bone is showing through. Never thought to see my own bone. Wounds that should have gone gangrenous long ago. Think only the cold keeps me alive, a kind of sterility.

Tirkiluk has shown me how to tame the wind. So simple I should let the boffins at Godalming know. Would have laughed if the fractured skin on my face would allow. Rattled those teeth around her neck, and called on Inua. Tied three knots, and the gale stilled, and a quarter moon brightened over the bay. Says she needs a time of quiet now that the baby is near. Says she needs the blood and the liver and the fresh water of the seal.

I resharpened the spear. I went out. Me, the pale hunter.

When I hunt, the cold disappears. Silence engulfs me. I love the bright darkness, the glassy emptiness. Can hear the glacier moving, and understand that one day it will eat the mountains. Ice is stronger than heat or rock or even the ocean. Was there at the start of the world, and will close over everything at the end, when the stars blink out. I wait. Then flash of movement, and the blood-heat that burns like a fire from the open body of the seal. I leave the cutting of the flesh to Tirkiluk, who eats and drinks most of it anyway, and burrows deep into the warmth. I must keep back. Not out of squeamishness, but because I fear the heat.

Return the bladder to the ocean and let the current draw it away, so that

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the seal will return for me to hunt again.

The baby came. A boy. A living boy. It's like the Aurora — there are no words. Leaned on her belly as she pushed. The incredible heat of her flesh, my fingers like cold leather, and fear in eyes through the pain at what I had become. We made a clean space for the child, brought in the fresh falling snow. She cleaned him and laid him on the skin of the seal. Then she gave him his first name. Naigo. Could feel the spirits crowding in, joining with the baby which is at its oldest when born. Filled with the memory of other lives. That's why a baby cries before it can laugh. Said she wanted to call him Seymour too, when my name floats free.

Tirkiluk fears that the wolves and the polar bear must come soon, drawn by the blood-stink of life and death that surrounds this dreadful place. I do not believe that she and the baby will survive, yet I know that I fight for their lives.

Keeps Naigo against her flesh. Will hardly let me see. Says the spirits will be offended. I know my grip is as cold as the glacier now, and that I must look awful, yet still I wish she would relent. The child feels half-mine. Yet I know from the wild fear in Tirkiluk's eyes that something is wrong. She sense's it greatly now that she has Naigo, now that the whispering ancient spirits are gathered around her and the baby. It's me. Something more than the fire and the cold and this terrible place. I know, yet I cannot bring myself to face it.

Inua was once a young girl just like Tirkiluk, yet she committed some crime, and her parents rowed out with her into the ocean in their umiak, and threw her overboard. When she clung to the side, they cut off her fingers, and they tossed a lamp to her as she sank down into the dark water, so that she might find her way.

Think that Inua is still out there, somewhere at the edge of this bay where the ice meets the black water in shattering, half frozen waves. Her long hair streams out in the currents like dark weed, uncombed and verminous because she has no fingers, and her lantern shines up at me as I peer down through the ice waiting for the seal to rise. Or perhaps it's Aquila I see glittering deep down in the water, which Tirkiluk tells me will soon rise back above the horizon. Or some other drowned star.

I sit outside now, leaving Tirkiluk and Naigo with what little warmth

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and shelter there is. The breath, the damp, the slight radiance that still comes from her half-frozen body, had become intolerable to me, although I think that she is also happier now that she does not have to see me when the ice cracks from her frozen eyelids and she looks up, and when the baby mews and she draws it out from somewhere inside her.

In starlight, I stand up and I pull back the frozen, useless furs. I can see my hands, my arms, my chest. If I drop the furs now, they skitter across the rocks and ice, shattering like filthy glass. Underneath, there are darkened ropes of chilled muscle, pulled tight by shriveled skin. My fingernails have peeled back like burned and blackened paint. From what little I can feel of my face with these hands, I have no nose, and my lips are stretched back so that my teeth are permanently bared.

The snow has returned. It gathers on these pages, and the flakes do not melt as I brush them away. It forms drifts, sculpting my body. I settle back into the downy comfort. I lie back as whiteness falls. My jaw creaks and the softness fills my mouth, settles on these eyes that do not blink. Soon, I will be covered, buried.

I think of Godalming. Of that hut by the tennis courts, and the sagging nets that no one has ever bothered to take in after the last set was played before war and the place was requisitioned. I think of Kay Alexander, her face sprayed with freckles, listening to the hissing seashell silence that drifts down from space.

She looks ragged from worry at the loss of the broadcasts from Weatherbase Logos II as she sits each evening at her receiver, although she knows that there's a war on and that this and worse will happen on every day until it's won. She remembers the shy man who was sent there, who sometimes came across the lawns from the main house in the summer, and would sit nearby at the edge of a table and fuss with the cuffs of his uniform or a pencil, barely meeting her eyes, talking about things without somehow ever really saying. Kay's hair is ragged now. Even in Surrey it is winter and the night comes early and the lanterns glow beyond the blackout blinds, and the stars drift down and leaves are tangled like fish in the rotting tennis nets. Kay's red tresses hang in verminous fronds, and as she lays out the code grid and lifts her headphones from the hook where she keeps them, the chill engulfs her and her fingers snap off one by one.

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Nearly covered in forgetful snow now. Cannot see. But Tirkiluk is hungry. She and Naigo need blood warmth. Must not give way. Must go and hunt the seal again. I know her face now, the mewling of her pain, the hot scent of her death spilling across the ice, the way the warmth of her blood makes my frozen, blackened flesh liquefy and dissolve.

The sun is starting to pearl the horizon, and Aquila will soon return. Tirkiluk's Aagyuuk. It signals the thaw.

The polar bear came along the frozen beach at midday. He came with the changing wind, just as the sun was rising. I knew that he would have to come, just as the seal always returns, bringing Tirkiluk and Naigo the gift of her life.

A terrible, beautiful scene, the mountains glittering nursery-pink. Then the white pelt, the lumbering flesh. He raised his snout, smelling fire and life and slaughter. He grunted, and howled.

Naigo began to cry in the shelter behind me, and Tirkiluk sang to soothe him, her voice ringing clear over the keening wind, knowing that there was no hiding, knowing that the beast sensed the warm meat that was waiting on their bones. I thought for a moment of the seal, and how death was a kinder thing here than the winter, and that if I could truly finish with dying and return to life, it would be to a warm place with faces and smiles, crying with the grief of ages, hooded in silver drifts of placenta. But the bear had seen me, and smelled the death that my own lungs and mouth no longer have to taste and smelled that I was an enemy.

I grabbed the harpoon as the bear lumbered toward me, driving it hard. It struck near the massive chest, reddening where the wind riffled the pelt. The beast was slowed, but still he came toward me. I had an odd strength in me — the strength to throw a harpoon harder and faster than the wind — yet I was light, thinly bound by rigored muscle and spongy ropes of blood. The bear reached me and tumbled me over and his jaw opened and teeth closed over my arm and shoulder. The teeth gave me no pain. It was the carrion-hot breath that terrified me.

Somehow, I pulled away from beneath him, dragged back on the bones of elbows and knees. I think he sensed then that he already had victory. Gray strands of ligament hung from his mouth, and my right collarbone dangled beneath. He shook it away. There was something playful and cat-like about

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the way he struck out at me with the massive pad of his paw. I was blown back as if by the wind as the claws striped my chest. I struck an outcrop of rock, feeling my left hand snap and roll away, and my leg break where the wound had exposed the bone, raising a pointed femur. The bear leapt at me, coming down, blocking sky.

My broken femur struck into his belly like a stake. He bellowed and the blood gushed in a salt wave. I knew that I would have to get away before the heat dissolved me entirely.

I didn't kill the bear. He ran back up the beach, trailing blood. The wound, which seemed so terrible as it broke over me from his belly, will probably heal easily enough. Spring is coming soon, and life will regather itself, and the bear will survive. I wish him luck, and the flesh of the seal when we have finally finished with her. I use the harpoon as a kind of crutch now that I can no longer walk easily. I have lashed the remains of my left arm to it, and struggle along the shore like a broken-winged bird.

I have to keep the harpoon lashed that way even when I hunt, but the seal now comes easily. She has died for us so many time now that she no longer fears death.

How I envy her. The bear's blood-heat and his teeth and claws have exposed and melted the flesh of my chest and belly. I can look down now as I shelter by a rock from the long ice-glittering shadows of the gathering sunlight. The dark frozen organs inside their cage, furred with ice.

I look up at the rim of the sky. Aagyuuk is rising. Across sixteen light years, Altair winks at me. While I still have time, I must catch the seal again.

The thaw is coming now, as Tirkiluk said it would once Aagyuuk had risen. There is faint light much of the day, and sudden flashes of the blazing rim of the sun through the clouds and glaciers that lie piled on the horizon. The wind is veering south. The seabirds are returning.

The ice in the bay booms now, and cracks like thunder. For Tirkiluk and Naigo, even though I know that there will be bitter storms to come, death has receded. She came out to see me today when the sun was sailing clear of the horizon and I was crouching in the ice-shadows where the cold wind drives deepest at the eastern end of the shore. She brought Naigo with her, gathered

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deep under her furs. She wept when she saw me, yet she held the child out for me to see. He slept despite the chill. Gently, I let the ragged claw of my remaining hand brush against his forehead, where the marks of birth have left his skin entirely. Then she drew him away, and held him to her breast and wept all the more. I would have wept with her, had I any tears left in me.

I went today to the place of bones. I've known for some time that it is where I should seek to avoid the gathering heat. I stood at the rim of the shadowed ravine with rags of my rotting flesh streaming in the wind, gazing down at those clean and serene skulls. But I know that the souls live elsewhere. They live on the wind, in the ice, and beneath the soft lids of Naigo's sleeping eyes.

I write with difficulty now as the skin sloughs off my fingers like old seaweed. These pages are filthy from the mess I leave, and I can only go out when the wind veers north, or in the cold of the night. Why should I strive to continue now, anyway? I can think of no reason other than fear.

A wide crack has appeared in the sheet of ice that covered the bay. It runs like a road from the horizon right up to the shore. Somehow, I believe I can smell the sea on it, the salt breath of the ocean.

Must write before I lose the fingers of remaining hand.

Went out onto the beach. As I gazed at the widening gap in the ice, the seal emerged from the wind-ripped water. She lumbered up across the rocks toward me, and stared without fear with the steam of life rising from her smooth dark pelt. I could only marvel and wonder, and feel a kind of love. She forgives, after all the times that her life has been taken. She turned then, and went back into the water and dived in a smooth deep ripple.

I thought then I stood alone in the wind, yet when I looked behind me, Tirkiluk was there. A dark figure, standing just as I have stood so many times at the edge of this shore, looking out at the crystal mountains, the glacier, the bay. She let me hold her, and touch the baby again. I knew that we were saying good-bye, although there were no words.

I can hear the seal mewling on the midnight wind. She is out on the shore again. Calling. Waiting. All I must do now is stand, and lift these limbs, and

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walk down toward the glittering path of water that spreads out across the bay. And the seal will lead me to the place in the ocean where a lantern gleams, dark hair streams, and fingerless hands spread wide in an embrace.

From there, the rest of my journey should be easy.

From the log of John Farragar, Ship's Captain, *Queen of Erin*. 12 May 1943.

Sailed 1200 hours Tuiak Bay SSE toward Neimaagen. A fire has destroyed Logos II Weatherbase, and a thorough search has revealed no trace of Science Officer Seymour. Have radioed Meteorological Intelligence at Godalming and advised that he should be listed as missing, presumed dead.

Also advised Godalming that an Eskimo woman and infant survived amid the burnt-out wreckage. They are aboard with us now, and I have no reason to doubt that the truth of this sad matter is as the woman has told me:

Seymour befriended her when she was abandoned by her tribe, and the fire was caused by an accident with a lantern at the time the broadcasts ceased. He died soon after from injuries caused by his attempts to recover supplies from the burning hut, and the body was subsequently taken by wolves. The later journals I have recovered are undated, and clearly the product of a sadly deranged mind. I would not wish them to reach the hands of his relatives, and I have thus taken the responsibility upon myself to have them destroyed in the ship's furnace.

Tirkiluk, the Eskimo woman, has asked to be landed at Kecskemet, where the tribe is very different from her own, and the wooded land is somewhat warmer and kinder. As the deviation from our course is small, I have agreed to her request. Her journey aboard the *Queen* should take little more than two days, but I am sure that by then we shall miss her.

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A new story by Jack Williamson is always an event. We have been lucky enough to feature two in the past few years, "The Birds' Turn" (October/November 1992) and "The Litlins" (December 1993). Now Jack favors us with a novelet tied to the novel he is currently working on, The Black Sun.

The novel came out of Jack's interest in the "dark matter" in the universe, which telescopes have not discovered. "I like to think it will not turn out to be some extraordinary new particle," he writes, "but simply ordinary matter in masses too small to set off the nuclear reactions that make stars shine."

Dark Star

By Jack Williamson

ONE

CARLOS MONDRAGON. A lean brown man without friends or money or even much English, he came from Cuerno del Oro, a poor *pueblito* in the mountains of Chihuahua. Owning only the computer skills he had taught himself, he had stowed away on the quantum ship to escape a world with no room for him, hoping to find a dream.

Don Diego had warned him of the strange quantum craft, which moved at a speed that stopped time. One light-year or a billion, the Don swore, a quantum flight would be less than an instant to those aboard, ending only when or if the ship was about to collide with some great star. Which might happen anywhere or not at all.

He had never expected a black dwarf sun to stop them, or the flight to end on a planet of ice and eternal night. Yet, because of *la rubia*, he could not be sorry. *La rubia*, that was his name for the beautiful *Doctora* Rima Virili, whom he admired for her bright hair and her good shape and her tender smile for her small daughter.

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She was the famous Anglo scientist with letters after her name, he only the illegal *mojado* who had yet to earn his place among these brave pioneers who were risking quantum flight for the chance to claim some new and better planet for *humanidad*. Her beauty frightened him; no rough *campesino* could ever hope to touch her.

"The ship's a seed," she had told Captain Stecker, when he did not wish to land. "The Mission exists to sow the human seed across the universe. We were meant to root and grow wherever we happened to fall. This may be hard soil, but we come prepared to terraform any soil. I think we can survive."

They were in the ship's control room. The holoscreens that arched above them were dark with imaged space, the black sun a round shadow on the stars, the ice planet a smaller blot beside it. The captain was a graceful, smiling Anglo with gold-enameled fingernails and a golden band around his flowing amber hair.

Handsome as *un torero*, the captain had the manner of Don Alfonso Madera. Cuerno del Oro meant horn of gold. Don Alfonso was a clever *picaro* who had stolen an ancient *registro* from the church. He made its faded pages into maps of the lost Cuerno mine, which he sold to *turistas*, bragging in *la cantina* that he could make *los gringos* believe that baby shit was gold.

"Anywhere but here." Without courage of his own, the captain drank it from a bottle; Mondragon heard the thickness in his voice. "We'll find some better world to settle."

"A problem, sir," Cruzet said. "This is the only planet here."

Los Doctores Cruzet and Andersen were Mondragon's *amigos*. They had let himprove his *conocimiento* of computers and work with them on the radar search team that searched this sunless dark until they found the planet. Cruzet's thoughts were often away among the stars, but Andersen was *muy simpático*. A red-haired *Tejano* engineer who understood his Chihuahua Spanish and laughed at the dangers of quantum flight.

"The only planet or no planet, I'm not landing on that snowball." Speaking louder, Stecker forgot to smile. "Not since that beacon warned us off."

"Sir, we don't know it was any kind of beacon." Andersen spoke with quiet respect. "All we saw was an odd flash of light down on the planet." He frowned at its black dot on the holoscreen. "Odd because of the way it changed, flickering through all the colors of the spectrum. We had no time to

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record anything, and it was not repeated. The planet is so cold that it has to be dead."

"Something's alive there." Stecker's narrow jaw set stubbornly. "Mr. Hinch takes that flash for a response to our radar beam. A message from something that doesn't want us landing."

"Look at it, sir." Cruzet gestured at the tiny blot. "A world without sunlight, cold almost to absolute zero. What could live there?"

Cruzet was short and quick and dark. No Anglo, he came from the place of high tech called CERN, and his accent was hard for Mondragon to understand. He sometimes frowned as if Andersen's jokes were riddles to him, but he understood the difficult mathematics of the quantum.

"You say it's dead?" Doubtfully, Stecker squinted at the black blot. "How do you know?"

"Sir, we know dark dwarfs." Cruzet looked at Andersen and waited for his nod. "They're born hot. Heated by gravitational contraction and nuclear fission, but too small to burn the hydrogen that keeps bright stars bright. This one's old. It cooled when the unstable elements were used up. That must have happened several billion years ago. The planet's close to zero Kelvin now. No energy left for any possible life."

"Too bad, Rima." Andersen shook his head at *la rubia*. "A hard world to terraform — "

"Forget it!" Stecker snapped. "We're not landing."

Mondragon had no liking for the captain. A man of Earth and not of space, he had been director of Mission StarSeed. Coming aboard to inspect the ship on the day before takeoff, he had abruptly seized command, explaining only that the mission was finished and his work on Earth was done.

"Sir, we've no choice," Cruzet told him now.

"Except to get back into quantum drive," he said. "And fly on the way we were."

"Impossible, sir," Andersen said. "Quantum craft don't control themselves. The launch from White Sands transformed us from a virtual particle into a virtual wave, firing us out of the pit like a bullet from a gun. We didn't bring the gun."

With no choice, they came down to a rocky headland at the rim of the continent of ice that covered half the planet. High cliffs rose north and west toward the ice. The frozen ocean lay south and east, beyond the ancient beach

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where *la rubia* and her team of engineers wished to begin excavations for the first habitat.

"No habitat," the captain told her. "If we excavate for anything, it will be for a launch facility. For whatever we need to get us off this damned snowball before we're attacked by God knows what."

"Sir," *El Señor* Glengarth protested, "I can't imagine anything that could attack us."

He was the first officer and the true master of the ship. Another Anglo, he was yet a fair man who had released Mondragon from security and allowed him to prove his *habilidad* with computers.

"Just look around us." Glengarth had gathered *los expertos* in the control dome to plan for survival. He gestured at the holoscreens that showed white-frosted rocks below and the flat white desert that had been an ocean. "I'm not much concerned about anything more hostile than the temperature."

He paused, with a small bow of respect for the captain.

"However, sir, it's true that nobody seems able to explain that peculiar flash. Before we undertake anything else, I want to assemble a vehicle and send out a party to look for the source."

He turned to smile at *la rubia*, and Mondragon flinched from a stab of jealousy for these fortunate Anglos, men whom *los santos* had favored with the culture and learning that made them her equals, privileged to know her, perhaps to win her love.

"With luck, Rima," he made a small *chiste*, "we'll be meeting a native engineer able to help you do your terraforming. You're going to need any help you can get."

When the scout *máquina* was ready, Mondragon volunteered to join Andersen and Cruzet on the search expedition. He wanted to earn his right among these people of science and courage, and perhaps, *con buena suerte*—

He dared not think of all he longed for.

Jake Hinch came to take command. A hawk-faced angry man with a ragged beard and a black beret, he was a friend of Stecker but still a stranger on the ship. Cruzet and Andersen looked hard at each other when they heard the clink of bottles in his bag, but he merely muttered an order for them to carry on as planned and took refuge in his curtained cubicle at the rear of the machine, making no trouble.

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The scout was new to all three of them, but easy enough to drive. A great, ungainly metal insect, it carried its bright steel shell high on six long lever-legs that rolled on big-tired wheels for feet. A heat lamp on a tall mast shone to shield them from the cold. They made practice runs along the old beach, and Andersen let Mondragon take the wheel when they set out across the frozen ocean.

"Steer by the sun," Andersen told him. "Just to the right of it."

The cold dwarf sun, the black spot on the stars. Never rising, never setting, it drifted very slowly higher and very slowly back again with the motion Cruzet called libration. Live stars blazed close around it, never dimming or even twinkling; no air or clouds had veiled them for geologic ages. The level whiteness showed no break ahead, no mark behind except the faint dark scar their tires made.

He caught a faint ozone bite from the cycler, which Andersen was still adjusting. Listening, he heard the whisper of the turbine, the muffled murmur when the others spoke, the rustle of his clothing when he moved. Nothing else, because this dead world had no air to carry sound.

He drove without the head lamps. Lighting the ice for only a few hundred meters, they had blinded him to everything beyond. Without them, his eyes adjusted to the starlight. A dim gray world with all color lost, except in the dull red glow of the heat lamp.

He had seen the troubling flash through the wide-field telescope as they orbited to land. A bright sudden light, burning through every color of the spectrum from deepest red to darkest violet, but gone before anybody could be sure of anything. It had come from a spot somewhere out across the frozen ocean, almost due east of the headland.

Five hundred kilometers out, Andersen said. Closer to a thousand, Cruzet thought. The ice around it had looked bright on the radar image, as if rough enough to make a strong reflection. Perhaps an island? A mountain? Cruzet, who had seen it at a higher resolution, said it had looked too tall and thin to be any natural mountain.

A fortress of the ice gods?

Those gods of ice had been only a joke from Andersen, who liked to recall his Viking forebears, but nobody had thought of anything more possible. The flash had come just after the radar search beam swept the spot. Could Jake Hinch be right? Had it been an actual warning, from anything alive?

Would it come again?

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Leaning over the wheel, Mondragon scanned the flat infinity of bone-white frost. A film of frozen argon and nitrogen, Cruzet said, the last trace of the vanished atmosphere. He scanned the splendid sky above it, steady stars burning brighter than those he had known in his boyhood in Chihuahua, set in constellations he had never seen. Ice and stars and dead black sun, nothing else.

No sudden flame with all the colors of *el arco iris*. No signal from the ice gods, if gods or devils either might exist in this ice *infierno* where no life of any kind should be. Cruzet came at last to take the wheel, and he climbed into the quartz-domed observation bubble and kept on watching till he dozed and shook himself awake to watch again. Ice and stars and dead sun-disk, *nada más*.

Andersen came to drive. At the kitchen shelf in the cabin, Cruzet stirred dry powder into hot water to make the bitter stuff they called syncafe and opened a pack of omninute wafers. Mondragon sliced a cold slab of soyamax, wishing for the goat *enchiladas* his mother used to make. They called Hinch to ask if he was hungry.

"Garbage!" he shouted through the curtain, voice slurred with whatever he had brought in his bottles. "I've got my own."

Andersen stopped the scout, and they ate soyamax and omninute.

"Compact calories," Andersen said. "Planned to keep the colony alive till we can do better. Every nutrient we need." He made a face. "It will make us try for anything better."

Mondragon slept an hour and took the wheel again. Frost and stars and the dead black sun. Still half asleep, he yawned and worked his stiff hands, stretched and stood behind the wheel, slapped his face and sat again, gripped the wheel and blinked at the level dark horizon.

Something there?

No spectral flash. Only a small black dot on the frost, but maybe something far away. He rubbed his eyes and veered a little toward it. The mountain Cruzet said looked too thin and high to be a mountain? His breath came faster. Should he radio the ship?

"Keep in constant touch," Glengarth had told them. "I don't know what's out there to concern us. Most likely nothing, but we've got to play it safe. If you come on anything unusual, anything at all, call at once. If you approach, do it with all the care you can."

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He reached for the radiophone, but stopped his hand when he saw that the object ahead looked suddenly closer, too small for any kind of mountain. When it crept into the heat lamp's glow, he saw that it was no monolithic obelisk of the ice gods, but only a solitary boulder.

Yet it was itself a puzzle to him. What had tossed it here, so far from any land, since the ocean froze? He steered closer for a better look. It was ice, a dark mass the size of a car, jaggedly broken. Searching his small pool of dim red light, he found nothing else except smaller fragments shattered off when it fell. An ice meteorite, fallen a million years ago? Perhaps a billion?

Level frost, black sun, endless midnight, *nada más*. He shrugged and drove on again, just to the right of the round black blot. Frost that had never thawed and never would. Stars that never changed. He blinked his aching eyes, his mind drifting back to Cuerno del Oro. The flat-roofed adobes around the plaza, the mud on the rutted streets when the rains came, the dust when they failed, the old stone church where his mother took him to mass. He remembered the ragged child he had been, bare feet numb and aching on frosty winter mornings when he had to herd his father's goats over the rocky hills above the village.

His first promise of escape had come from Don Diego Morales, who returned for the village fiestas and spoke of the starbirds that flew from the white sands in *el norte* to scatter the human seed across the new and richer worlds that might exist out among the stars.

"I'll learn to ride the star ships," he told the Don. "*Cuando tengo suficiente años.*"

"*Nunca.*" The lean old Don shook his head. "The stars want no stupid *campesinos*. I am allowed to work at the launch site, but only at tasks too heavy or too dirty for a gringo. *No hay nada.*" He spat brown tobacco juice at a spider in the dust. "They have no place for such as you."

"*Pero yo* — " he told the Don. "I will learn what the gringos learn and walk with them among the stars."

Growing up in the village, he learned all he could at *la escuela*. He learned his small *inglés* from the Don and the books the Don brought him from *el norte*. He learned to repair and run an old computer the Don had brought him when the Anglos threw it away, and saved his few pesos to pay for a new one.

Remembering, he felt glad *la rubia* could never know Cuerno del Oro, could never feel the pain of life there, never smell the sewer ditch or swat the

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flies or hear the hungry *niños* crying. She would blame the people for what they could not help, scorn him for an ignorant *mojado* —

Or was the thought unfair to her?

He remembered her brave *joven hijo* Kip, who had found him hiding on the ship, seen his dripping blood, become *un buen amigo*. She was still the Anglo stranger who hardly knew he was alive, but perhaps if he could earn a place among these pioneers of the stars —

Perhaps.

A sharp jolt bought him back to the frost and the boulders. Fragments of broken ice scattered the pale ruby glow around him. He rubbed his eyes and found more fragments emerging from the starlight ahead, always larger until they became a barrier along the starlit horizon.

A sharper jolt. The scout rocked and dropped.

"Carlos?" Cruzet shouted from the cabin. "What hit us?"

He braked the scout to search his small red island. The vehicle had dropped off a ledge half a meter high, hidden under the frost.

"We fell." He pointed at the ledge. "A drop I didn't see."

"A fracture." Andersen stood peering over his shoulder. "The old sea is frozen to the bottom. Ice here can fracture like any rock." He turned to scan the boulder wall ahead. "Ejecta," he said. "From a meteor crater. We'll get around it. And then — "

He stopped himself, but his craggy face had lit.

"An adventure I never expected." He swung to grin at Cruzet. "You know I began in geology. Switched to astrophysics because our old Earth was known too well. Now this whole planet's ours. A new geology for us to read!"

"Ours?" Cruzet stood with him, staring off into the east, where they thought the flash had been. "Are you sure?"

Andersen went back to keep the fusion engine running.

"My turn to drive." Cruzet beckoned Mondragon away from the wheel. "Get some sleep."

He crawled into his berth in the main cabin. Hinch was snoring behind the curtain, but he couldn't sleep. Cuerno del Oro was too far away, the world of the ice gods too cold and dark and strange. He climbed again into the observation bubble. Cruzet had steered north to find a way around the crater.

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The frost beyond lay flat again, white and flat to the black horizon. Ice and midnight, *nada más.*

He sat at the instrument board, staring out across that dead starlit infinity, till the chime of the watch clock roused him to read the temperature of the surface radiation and enter it in the log. He used the sextant, as Andersen had taught him, to get a position that let him add one more black ink-dot to the line of black dots on the blank page that was to be their map. And he called the ship.

"Rima Virili here." *La rubia's* voice startled him. A voice like a song, musical with her beauty. "Acting aide to Mr. Glengarth."

"*Buenas* — " He stopped himself. He should not be speaking Spanish. Not to her. "Carlos Mondragon, reporting."

"Yes?" Her words were courteous and quick, with none of what he felt. "Anything unusual?"

"No problems." He tried for the same expressionless briskness. "Position three hundred seventy-one kilometers east of the ship. Eighteen north. We swung north to get around a crater where Mr. Andersen says a meteor struck the ice. Ice temperature nine degrees Kelvin. The way ahead looks clear. Nothing unusual. No island, no mountain, no signal light."

"Thank you, Mr. Mondragon. I'll inform Mr. Glengarth. Have you anything to add?"

He wanted to ask of *el joven* Kip. And of Day, the younger *niñita*, who had *la rubia's* bright hair and grieved for Me Me, the panda doll she had to leave on Earth. He wanted to tell her that even an untaught *campesino* might have the feelings of a man.

"Mr. Mondragon?" He had not spoken. "Anything else?"

She was still the gringa *extranjera*. He heard no warmth in her crisp, inquiring tone.

"*Nada*," he said. "Nothing more."

"Keep in touch," she said. "Mr. Glengarth is concerned. He wants full reports."

The telephone clicked.

He was *nadie*. Nobody to her. Not to any Anglo, except perhaps her fine *muchachito* Kip. Yet he sat there searching the frost, wondering if her art of terraforming could be truly the magic that might turn this planet of ice into the home she wished to make for *los niñitos*. How could they survive at nine

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degrees Kelvin? Who except the ice gods, which were only *El Señor* Andy's joke —

"Carlos!" Cruzet's sharp, impatient voice. "Carlos, are you awake?"

"*¿Que?*" Groggy with sleep, he sat up in the chair. "Now I am."

"Look out ahead and call the ship."

Stiff from sitting too long, he turned to look. Cruzet had slowed the scout. A few hundred meters ahead, a cliff had risen between the frost and the midnight sky, a sheer wall of dark ice a dozen meters high. It ran straight to right and left as far as he could see.

"*¡Madre de Dios!*" he breathed. "*¿Que es?*"

"Another geologic fault. Andersen says we're in a zone of quakes."

"Can we climb it?"

"Look just above it. We may not want to climb it."

He looked and saw nothing till a hot red point exploded like a nova deep inside the ice. It swelled into a burning disk of rainbow circles that made a target pattern as tall as the cliff. He saw no change for another half minute. Then a darkness spread from the center till all the color was gone.

"A word from the locals." Cruzet's sharp ironic voice crackled out of the interphone. "Welcome, stranger? Or is it scram? Scram while you can?"

Two

CALLING THE SHIP, he waited for *la rubia's* voice. For a long time all he heard was the faint rush and murmur of the galaxy's distant heart. When at last he heard a voice, it wasn't hers.

"...garbled...signal garbled...please repeat..."

"Scout calling." He tried again. "Reporting a wall of ice — "

"Carlos?" Glengarth's voice, suddenly stronger, edged with sharp concern. "What's happening?"

"A wall of ice across our path, *señor. Muy alto. El Doctor* Cruzet is backing us away."

"Take no chances — "

"Something else, *Señor. Más extraño.* A bright light burning in the ice — "

"Can you describe it?"

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"*Círculos, señor.* Circles of light that grow from the center like ripples on water till they show every color *del arco iris*. Though I think they cease now as we move away."

"Strange." Glengarth paused, perhaps not wanting to believe. "Did you see a cause?"

"No, *Señor*, except that it appeared as we came near. *El Doctor* Cruzet thinks perhaps it is intended as a signal."

"From whom?"

"*Yo no se*. Perhaps the beings of the mountain."

"Have you seen any mountain?"

"Not yet, *señor*. Nothing except the white frost that covers the ice all the way to the sky."

"Perhaps — I hope you find no mountain. Are you in danger now?"

"*Yo creo que no*. Now we are stopping again, farther from the wall. The circles of color do not return."

"Let me speak to your commander."

"Mr. Hinch is below, sir. Sleeping. Or I think *borracho*."

"Get me Mr. Andersen."

"Andy here, sir." He spoke at once from the nose of the scout. "On the interphone."

"This wall?" Glengarth's tone had sharpened. "What about it?"

"It looks natural enough, sir. A natural geologic upthrust. The fault line runs north and south as far as we can see. Nothing to show when it happened. Could have been a billion years ago. But — well sir, I just don't know — "

Doubt slowed his voice.

"It has certainly stopped us. For all I know, it could have been created to keep intruders off that island. If there really is an island. When you think about what we seem to be facing, anything able to survive here would have to be highly advanced."

"I suppose. What's this about Mr. Hinch?"

"He's down in his berth. Probably drunk."

"I see." Glengarth paused. "He's an odd one. A surprise to me when he wanted command of the vehicle, but he'd had some kind of dust-up with the captain. Any trouble to you?"

"None, sir. He just told us to carry on."

"Do that. Keep in touch. About this light in the ice?"

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"Nothing I can explain, sir. A target-shape of expanding rings, colored like that flash we saw from space. Maybe meant to tell us we're close enough."

"I think you are." A sharper tone. "Wake Mr. Hinch if you can. Inform him that his orders are to turn back at once. And hold the line open. I want constant contact."

"Okay sir."

Mondragon kept the headphones on, but the contact was broken. He heard Andersen calling Hinch and then the whisper of the turbine as they pulled farther from the barrier.

"Hold it!" Hinch's hoarse sardonic bark came close behind him. "If Mr. Glengarth's still on the line, tell him I've been informed. Tipsy, maybe, but not too drunk to run this bleedin' circus. We ain't going back."

Twisting, Mondragon found Hinch behind him at the top of the cabin steps, gaunt face flushed behind the straggle of beard, a pistol in his hand.

"*¿Que*?" he whispered. "*¿Que quiere*?"

"*¡Escuche¡*" A slurred command. "Get this! All three of you. To hell with Stecker and the ship. We're going on to that bleedin' mountain. If there is a bleedin' mountain — "

"*Señor* — " He had to catch his breath. "*Señor* Hinch, have you looked outside?"

"I see the cliff." Hinch was breathing hard. The pistol shook in his hand. "I saw the bleedin' flash. Maybe meant to scare us off, but I don't scare. We'll climb the bleedin' ice — "

"*¡Señor!*" he begged. "*¡Cuidado con la pistola*!"

"*Cuidado* yourself!" Hinch waved the gun. "I ain't *borracho*, and we ain't turning back."

"I think we're in danger, sir," Andersen called, "if we ignore that signal — "

"We could die." Hinch laughed, a brief, harsh snort. "So what the bleedin' hell! We're already done for, murdered by this crazy mission. We can die slow, of cold and hunger here on the ice. Or faster, if that bleedin' scumbag Stecker gets us back on his death-trap ship and shoots it off again to God knows what. I'll take the ice gods, if you want to call 'em gods. No worse than Rip Stecker."

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"*Señor* — " Mondragon watched the pistol and searched for words. "*La Doctora* Virili says we need not die. She says we came to terraform the planet. She says we have knowledge to keep us alive, on the ice or under it."

"Turned to bleedin' cannibals!"

"*Creo que no, señor.* I think we need not die. The engineers have technology for the art called terraforming — " He shrank from a sweep of the gun. "Please, *Señor,* I think we must continue our search. Perhaps the light burns to make us welcome."

"Not very bleedin' likely!"

"We don't know." Andersen's quiet voice again. "Mr. Hinch, you puzzle me. I believe you came with us because of some misunderstanding with Captain Stecker?"

"If you give a bleedin' damn — " Hinch stepped back and lowered the pistol, but his eyes had a look of desperation. "Let me tell you what a slimy bastard Rip Stecker is."

"No friend of mine." Cruzet spoke somewhere below. "A dirty trick he played, throwing Captain Alt off the ship."

Startled, Hinch jumped and tipped his haggard head.

"A filthier trick on me! Kidnapped me off the bleedin' Earth. Got me drunk and kept me aboard when I never meant to come. Just to shut me up about his bleedin' thievery."

Livid now, his gaunt face twitched.

"But I ain't dead. Not quite yet!"

"So, Mr. Hinch?" Andersen asked. "What do you want to say?"

"No secrets here. Not among the dead." Hinch grinned, his hollowed eyes glaring past Mondragon at the frost and the ice wall and the stars. "Rip's a slick one. Top con man of the bleedin' century, if you ain't already guessed it. He embezzled millions out of the bleedin' mission. Got aboard the ship maybe two minutes ahead of the law. If you wonder how I know, he used me for his bleedin' cat's-paw."

"Huh?"

"StarSeed Mission used to be big business. Real big business!" His ragged voice had slowed, and his arm seemed to relax with the gun. "Every bleedin' ship cost millions, and they launched a lot of ships. Rip Stecker's job was raising all those millions. Conning it out of the bleedin' true believers, and he knew how to diddle the nuts into trading all they had for their chance to

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shape human destiny — that's what he called his one-way tickets to die.

"Did it in his own high style." Hinch laughed again, raucously. "Mark him up for that. Ritzy apartments in New York and Geneva. Women to match. He loved to gamble in top casinos all over the world, drunk half the time. Went wild at the end, squandering ten times his pay. That's when he got his hooks into me."

He waved the gun and grinned when Mondragon ducked.

"I'd made my own mistakes. Dipped into the wrong till and did ten years for it. Branded with that, I tried to change my name and make a better start. He found me out and put me to work for him. As mission auditor. I got sick of him and went to the law, which is why he did me in."

He twisted to glare belligerently at Cruzet.

"And why I ain't afraid of him, or you, or any bleedin' ice gods. I ain't going back to die on the ship and let that bastard gnaw my bones. Got it?"

"Thank you, Mr. Hinch." Andersen spoke very quietly through the interphone. "I think we've got it. I'm glad to know where you stand, but I wonder how you hope to get past this fault in the ice."

"Your problem." Hinch grinned. "You're the engineer."

He went below again. Mondragon heard a bottle clink. Another kilometer back from the ice wall, Andersen stopped the scout to inspect the reactor and the turbine. Cruzet put on his airskin and went down through the lock to check the tires and steering gear.

"Vehicle still heated into safe service range," he reported. "An ice fog around us since we stopped. Formed from frozen air that sublimes under the lamp and freezes again as it spreads."

"Write it in your bleedin' log." Hinch was pushing into the bubble. "If you think anything human will ever live to see it."

Yet, in spite of such sarcasm, he turned suddenly amiable, offering to share his whisky. Mondragon made fresh syncafe and toasted omninute wafers in the microwave. They gathered in the cabin for a meal before Cruzet took the controls to drive them north along the wall. It sank a little, but after ten kilometers it was still four meters high.

"Let's take a look," Andersen called. "I think we can climb it here."

"If you can — " Hinch twisted to squint at him doubtfully. "Do it."

They stopped near the fault. Andersen climbed down through the lock

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with a box of tools. In the bubble, Mondragon watched him at the wall, drilling holes with a laser that exploded the ice into steam that froze into a thin red fog around them. Loading explosive into the holes, he gestured Cruzet to back them away.

The silent blast lit a great eruption of steam and ice fragments with a flash that dazzled Mondragon. When he could see again, the starlight showed a sloping gap in the barrier. Anderson came back aboard, and Cruzet drove them jolting through it.

"Call the ship," Andersen told Mondragon. "If Mr. Hinch doesn't mind."

Hinch didn't mind.

"What the bleedin' hell," he muttered. "The bleedin' bastard can't touch us now."

Calling, he heard only the hiss and whisper of the cosmos.

"We've dropped below line of sight," Andersen told him. "Which means that any signals have to be reflected down to reach us. The planet seems to have no reflecting ionosphere. Only a broken ring of something higher. Dust, I imagine. We must be under a gap in the ring."

Staring from the bubble as they rolled on, all Mondragon saw was the same infinite flatness of ash-white frost, the same unbroken black horizon, the same eternal stars. Hinch roved the machine for a time, peering ahead from the nose and then from the bubble, and finally vanished into his curtained cubicle.

Andersen stowed his tools away, yawned, and went down to take a nap. When the watch clock chimed, Mondragon read the sextant and the surface temperature, made another black dot on the route map, and got no answer to another call. He was dozing when he heard Cruzet's excited yelp.

"Look ahead! Another light!"

He blinked his sticky eyes and found a point of changing color low above the east horizon. Red that changed to orange, yellow to green, blue to violet and faded into indigo. Long seconds of darkness, and it began again.

"One more warning." Andersen looked at Hinch, who had followed him into the bubble. "Sir, I think we've come far enough?"

"Drive on." Hinch's eyes were red and hollow, the whisky slowing his gritty voice. "Ice gods or ice devils, I'll see how they take human heat."

Andersen turned to Mondragon. "Try the ship."

Again all he heard was the rush of energies too vast for him to understand.

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Andersen went down to spell Cruzet at the wheel. Alone in the bubble, cut off from all humankind, Mondragon felt that they were utterly alone in their tiny shell, trapped under the uncaring silence of the ice and the weight of endless time. Almost, he thought, as if they were already dead.

The telephone startled him.

"Calling...calling scout..."

La rubia! Her voice was a thread of life, stretched too thin, too far from warmth and life and hope. In a moment like a dream, he seemed to see her as if she stood somehow on the stony hill behind Cuerno del Oro, facing a wind that blew her bright hair back, holding *la niñita* and the panda doll in her arms.

"Ship calling scout." Her voice was suddenly stronger. "Can you hear?"

"*¡Si!*" He gasped the words in Spanish. "*Escucho.*"

"Carlos?" He was sorry for the Spanish, but at least she knew his voice. "Where are you now?"

"We blasted a way through the ice wall. We are driving on."

"You were ordered to return." A crisp reprimand. "Mr. Glengarth thinks you're in danger."

"Perhaps. Mr. Hinch doesn't care."

"Let me speak to him."

"He's below. Probably sleeping."

"Get him on the phone." Her voice grew sharper. "Captain Stecker wants a word with him."

"He won't want to talk, but I have something else to report. We see something like a new star low in the east, changing through the rainbow colors we saw from space."

"I think you are danger. Let me speak..."

That thread of life had broken. Her voice was gone.

He called Andersen to the bubble, to be there if she got through again. At the wheel himself, he drove on toward the light. No star at all, it burned always brighter, swelled into a rippling target-shape, climbed till he found the mountain under it. No mountain, either, but a thin black rectangle so tall he could not believe it. He stopped the scout, and they all gathered in the bubble, hushed with puzzlement.

"What the devil!" Hinch exploded. "What the bleedin' devil!"

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"Nothing natural," Andersen murmured. "Looks like a building, but tall as a mountain. Perhaps they *were* gods."

They drove on, stopped to study it, drove on again across an ancient beach and up toward where it stood, on a low hill worn smooth with time and silvered with frost. Higher, higher, the tower climbed to blot out half the stars. The flow of color across its face cast a rainbow shimmer over them, brighter than the heat lamp.

"Enough." They were still two hundred meters away, but Andersen raised his hand. "Close enough."

"*¿Que es?*" Mondragon breathed. "What is it?"

They craned their necks and kept on looking. The work of giants, Mondragon thought, if not actual gods. Shading his eyes against the unsteady light, he could trace darker seams between the enormous blocks that formed the wall, blocks twenty meters, maybe thirty on a side. One must have fallen, shattering into a great pile of rubble.

"A door?" Cruzet frowned and pointed. "Is that a door?"

A rectangular patch of deeper darkness half hidden by the rubble, at first it looked too small to be an entrance, not half the height of the titanic blocks around it, but when he let his eyes measure it again, he thought it would be half a dozen meters wide. Squinting through the glow from overhead, he found only darkness inside.

"Near enough," Andersen said again. "I think we've learned enough — "

"Enough?" Hinch's hoarse rasp stopped him. "I'm going in to face the bleedin' monsters in their den and find out what their bleedin' signal means."

THREE

"We've found their bleedin' hive. I'm going in." Hinch goggled at Andersen, his eyes blood-shot and wild. "Coming along?"

"Not our mission, sir." Andersen shook his head. "We were just to look and report what we found. We've found enough to trouble me. The report's our duty now."

"What, exactly, have we found?" Hinch demanded.

"I take it to be convincing evidence of intelligent life and a sophisticated civilization older than the ice. Maybe still alive — "

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"Ice gods!" Hinch mocked him. "Can you tell 'em what the bleedin' ice gods are?"

"Sir, I think we've found a potential danger to the ship. To any colony we might plant. I think we ought get back while we can, at least into radio range."

"If you're all bleedin' cowards — " Hinch glared at Andersen and then at Cruzet. "I ain't! Get me into my airskin."

Andersen stared back for a moment.

"You shouldn't, sir." He shrugged reluctantly. "But you're in charge."

"*Señor* — " Mondragon had to gulp and catch his breath. "*Señor*, you should not go *solo*."

"Then come along."

"Okay, *Señor*."

His own words surprised him. He saw Cruzet and Andersen glancing at each other as if to say he was a fool, but he followed Hinch down to the lock.

He had worn the airskin only once, for a test walk down to the old beach and back. The tight-fitted fabric was filled with channels that breathed recycled air over all his body to dry the sweat and cool or warm it. The recycler made a hump on his back. A crystal shell covered his head. Andersen sealed him inside and made him check the controls.

"Watch your cycler," he said. "The air cartridge should do you ten to twelve hours."

They scrambled down to the frost and stood peering up at the tower. Darker than the sky, it covered half the constellations. He shuddered as if the planet's bitter cold had got into the airskin. *De verdad*, the powers of the ice gods must be enormous.

Brighter than the heat lamp, the glow from those swelling circles on the tower's face rimmed their shadows with changing color. The vastness of the tower and the strangeness of the light seized him like the hand of death, turning this frozen world into the hell where Father Martino used to warn him that *los demonios* would be waiting to receive him when he died.

Hinch himself was suddenly another demon. Lean as a spider in his own tight yellow airskin, he still wore the black beret, even in the helmet. His gaunt, gray-bearded head seemed too big for it, and his haggard eyes behind the thick-lensed glasses looked half blind and hardly human. With the pistol and a long-bladed knife buckled to his belt, he had become *un verdadero diabillo*.

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Mondragon shrank from him, feeling a sudden pang of sickness for his own native *pueblito*, the flat-roofed adobe where he was born, the rocky hills where he used to herd his father's goats, the old church where his mother prayed. The days since he left it had been a long nightmare of events stranger that he had thought death would be.

The flight across the light-years that took no time at all, this black sun, these blazing stars that never dimmed, this monstrous work of unknown things. *Ciertamente* this was not the rich new Earth *El Señor* Stecker and the *evangelistas* of Mission StarSeed had promised their believers.

Yet *la rubia* was here, with *el joven* Kip. And little Day, *una muchachita que bonita*. Terraforming was a magic of science he did not understand, but engineers who could build and fly quantum craft had to be respected. At least, with the favor of *los santos*, he would do whatever he could —

"Chicken?" Hinch's jeering voice rang in his helmet. "Or have the ice gods frozen you?"

Anger clenched his fists and faded slowly into shame. He had done nothing for *la rubia*, found nothing he could even hope to do. He felt helpless in the thin airskin, naked to the cruel cold and *el gringo's* crueler scorn. Hinch had become *un loco*, urging them on till some evil monster killed them.

Yet he himself was no *pollo*, no kind of chicken.

"*¡Hijo de cabrón!*" he muttered, and tramped after Hinch toward the tower. The area was level, as if an ancient pavement lay beneath the frost, but that rubble mountain stood half across their path, the fallen stone shattered into fragments larger than houses.

Beyond it, Hinch glanced back at him and pushed ahead into *la entrada*, a square tunnel ten meters high. Dim starlight followed them a few dozen meters, and faded into blackness. Hinch slowed to search it with a pale flashlight that soon found the end of the passage, a blank plate of some dull-gray metal, scarred with ages of corrosion.

"*¿La puerta?*"

A door? Flickering unsteadily over it, the little spot of light found no knob or handle or lock, not even any visible seam to outline any kind of door. Door or not, they had no key.

"*¡No hay problema!*" Hinch gritted. "Mr. Andersen has a very useful *llave*."

* * *

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Breathing deeper, relieved to be escaping *los acertijos* of the tower, he hurried after Hinch back to the scout. Cruzet was on watch in the bubble, but Andersen came down from the nose to meet them at the air lock.

"A bleedin' wall across the tunnel!" Hinch was still in the airskin, his rusty voice booming out of the interphone speakers. "The bleedin' creatures want to seal us out. I want you to get us in the way you got us past that ice uplift."

"High explosive?" Andersen shook his head. "That's asking them to hit us back."

"If they can." Hinch tilted his head to squint as if the cabin lights had blinded him. "But if you want my guess, they died a billion years ago. Anything alive would clean up that mess of rocks outside."

"Something's alive," Cruzet protested. "Alive enough to see us coming."

Hinch glared at him.

"Think about it, sir," Andersen begged him. "They don't want us here."

"Maybe they'll kill us." Hinch shrugged. "Maybe they can't. Maybe they've got something we can use." His gaunt head jerked toward the tower. "Maybe — "

"Are you crazy?"

"Aren't we all?" His voice went shrill. "Dead already, don't forget. God knows what's in there for us to grab — "

"You *are* crazy," Andersen told him. "You really are."

"Whatever you say, Mr. Andersen." Hinch's yellow-gloved claw gripped his gun. "Just let me into the bleedin' tower."

Andersen frowned, shifting on his feet.

"I'll set the charge." He shrugged. "With a timer to let us get back to where I hope we're safe."

Mondragon returned to the tunnel with them, carrying a backpack filled with blocks of something wrapped in bright-red foil. Andersen's laser drill failed to mark the gray metal plate, but it bit slowly into the stone, a jet of silent steam blowing plumes of black dust from the holes.

"Keep alert," Andersen told him. "Warn me if you see anything happening."

Uneasily watching, all he saw was the soundless dark. Andersen drilled three deep holes at the edge of the barrier, packed them with explosive, set the timer. Gathering his tools, he led them out of the tunnel.

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Just outside, Hinch stopped to wait.

"Far enough," he muttered. "I want to rush 'em with their bleedin' pants still down."

"If they wear pants — " Andersen grinned for an instant, and hurried on. "I don't want to know."

Cruzet drove them back down to the old beach. They waited in the bubble, watching with binoculars. Hinch had crouched behind the rubble mound. Counting under his breath, Andersen finally whispered, "Now!"

Mondragon felt the scout shiver. Hinch straightened, stood a moment peering around him, and darted into the tunnel. They waited again, taking turns with the binoculars. Hinch didn't come out. Neither did anything else.

Time passed. The stars blazed overhead, as they had blazed forever. The signal light — if it was a signal light — kept blazing on the tower. Rainbow hues rippled over rocks and frost. Andersen updated the log. Cruzet heated water for bitter syncafe.

"Coffee it ain't." Andersen drained his cup, made a face, and frowned at them. "Want to go in to look for Mr. Hinch?"

"Hardly." Cruzet scowled. "Are we idiots?"

"*Yo creo que no.*" Mondragon shook his head. "I think we must go back to tell what we have seen."

"But not quite yet." Andersen looked at his watch. "We'll give him eight more hours. About the limit of his cycler cartridge. If he's still alive."

On watch in the bubble three hours later, Mondragon felt a heavier jolt. The sky seemed to dim. Clutching at his seat, he looked up to see that great disk of flowing color flicker and dim. It went out. The tower was left a stark black shadow that reached to the zenith.

"What was that?" Andersen came muttering up the steps into the bubble. "I was asleep."

"*¡Un terremoto*? The tower light was extinguished."

They stood peering back at the tower and out across the flat whiteness of the frozen sea. Andersen typed a note into the log and shook his head. "I don't get it. The planet ought to be cold to the core, with no energy left for any kind of quakes — "

"*¡Allí!*" Mondragon caught his breath and pointed. "*El Señor* Hinch."

Hinch had come out of the tunnel and dropped flat behind the rubble mound, though nothing seemed to pursue. He had lost the pistol and the

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knife. In a moment he was on his feet again, running hard, empty hands beating wildly around his head as if trying to strike at some invisible attacker.

"*¡Salio!*" Mondragon shouted to Cruzet. "Open the lock for him!"

"Will do."

He heard the motors whir and the muffled clang of the opening door. Hinch came up beside them, beating desperately at nothing. The black beret was gone. The glasses had slid aside, hanging on one ear. He ran with his head twisted to look back, darting from side to side as if he hadn't seen the scout.

"*¡Señor!*" Mondragon gasped into the microphone. "*¡Aquí!*"

Deaf to him, Hinch veered around them and ran on until they lost him in the starlight.

"We'll follow," Andersen said. "He'll have to stop when he's exhausted. We'll try to pick him up."

They traced his footprints, sometimes visible where his boots had crushed the film of frost, though often too dim to see. He had run fast and far. They had come nearly six kilometers out across the frozen sea before Mondragon saw a dark scar ahead, with no tracks beyond it.

"*¡Alto!*" he shouted. "Stop!"

Cruzet stopped the machine a few meters from a sharp-edged crevasse two meters wide.

"Opened by that quake." Andersen stared into it, blankly nodding. "Since we came."

It ran almost straight in both directions as far as they could see. Still in their airskins, Andersen and Mondragon went out to look over the edge. The rim was pink in the heat lamp's glow, but the sheer ice walls turned black a few meters down. They saw no bottom.

"I think the gods of ice were angered," Mondragon said. "I think they opened the ice to swallow *El Señor* Hinch."

He felt a chill of fear, and a sadness for Hinch. *Un loco*, but perhaps more unlucky than evil. *El hombre más malisimo* was surely Captain Stecker, who had made Hinch a greater thief than he had ever been, and then brought him on the flight to silence the story of their crimes. Not that the ice gods would care about human good or human evil. They had simply moved with their terrible power to defend themselves from the intruder who broke into the tower in spite of their warnings. *Por la gracia de Dios*, they had not harmed the scout.

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Aboard again, they found Cruzet in the bubble.

"Are we trapped?" He nodded anxiously at the fissure. "Or can we get across?"

"We must." Andersen stood a moment staring grimly back at the tower. "With news of this for Glengarth. I think it means we'd better get off the planet, any way we can."

¡Que lástima! Mondragon thought. *Que lástima por la Doctora Virili y los niñitos pobrecitos. Ciertamente* now, this dark world would never be terraformed into the home she hoped for.

"I'll take the wheel." Andersen studied the crevasse. "It's hardly two meters wide. With the legs extended to full span, I think I can drive us — "

He stopped, with an odd sound in his throat. His lanky body jerked and stiffened. Eyes strangely glazing, he stood rigid for an endless minute, staring at the tower.

"Take...wheel...now..." He caught a wheezy breath. His voice had slowed, his loud words stranger than his blind and glassy eyes. "Drive...back ...tower..."

"Andy?" Cruzet shrank from him "What's hit you?"

"Take...wheel...drive...tower...now..."

FOUR

¡MUERTO!" Mondragon shrank from that glassy glare. *"Un muerto."*

"Now!" Andersen's stiffened arm lifted convulsively, as if to strike him, and the dead voice came again. "Tower...now!"

"Okay." Silent for a dozen heartbeats, Cruzet nodded quietly. "Okay, Andy. Anything you want."

With a dazed shrug, he returned to the controls and drove them back to the tower. Mondragon crouched away from Andersen, feeling sick with pity and dread. A brave and able man of science, a friend who never seemed to care that he was only an illegal *polizón* aboard the ship without rights or place —

What was Andersen now?

Something too strange to be human, he stood without motion, as if the ice gods had turned him to a man of ice. His breath was a slow, labored rasp.

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His blind stare fixed on the tower ahead, he said nothing else until Cruzet stopped them beside that mountain of broken stone.

"Lock..." His strange loud groan came again. "Out...now!"

Moving with clumsy awkwardness, he climbed down into the air lock. Following uneasily, Mondragon heard the hum and thud of the opening valve and saw Andersen clamber into it, bareheaded.

"*¡Pare, Señor!*" he shouted. "You require your helmet."

Andersen froze.

"Hel?" He labored with the word. "Hel-met...now!"

Cruzet came down to help him seal and lock the crystal shell. Climbing into the bubble, they watched him stalk unsteadily out of the heat lamp's glow. Reeling at first as if he had no sense of balance, he rounded the rubble pile and disappeared into the darkness of the tunnel.

"*¡Una máquina!*" Mondragon whispered. "No longer a man."

"My friend," Cruzet made a bitter face. "Since high school. We came looking for a better world than Earth. Came a thousand light-years for this!"

"Perhaps we should follow?" Mondragon frowned uncertainly. "To see what happens? Help him if we can?"

"He wouldn't want us taking such a risk." Cruzet shook his head. "Our duty is still to get word back to the ship."

And to *la rubia*, though word of this would bring her no cheer.

"*Voy* — " His own voice unnerved him, but the duty was plain. Cruzet could carry the news with no aid from him. He gulped and began again. "*Voy a ir. El Señor* Andy was kind to me. Perhaps he needs me now."

Cruzet had been another man of science, who spoke the language of mathematics, lived in the vast cosmos where worlds were only atoms, and who sometimes spoke of mankind as only one more species in danger of extinction. Yet his voice broke now, and tears filled his eyes.

"If you would — " he whispered hoarsely, and paused to frown in thought. "He will be in trouble when his air cell fails. It's already had seven or eight hours of use. You might follow with a spare."

"*¡Hecho! Hecho.* Anything I can."

Cruzet found the spare and showed him once more how to fit it to the airskin. Carrying it slung over his shoulder, he left the scout and followed around the rubble and into the tunnel. That eroded metal barrier showed no damage when he reached it, but Andersen had gone on beyond the ragged gap

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the blast had torn in the stone. Climbing through the gap, he stabbed his light into blackness beyond.

"*¡Señor!*" He tried to shout, but the weight of darkness and *la potencia* of the ice gods had crushed his voice to a rusty quaver. "*Donde* — ? Where are you?"

No answer. He called again, listened again, pushed on again, trying to shut his mind to *el miedo y los demonios* of the dark. The tunnel here sloped sharply upward. Shivering from something more than cold, from the dead stillness of many billion years, he listened and climbed again until a tiny square of blue light glowed and brightened far ahead, Andersen's angular frame outlined for a moment against it.

Breathing faster, he pushed to the top of the slope and came out of the tunnel into a space so great that the shock of wonder stopped him. The floor was a wide field of some dull gray stuff, a full kilometer long. The walls towered sixty meters high. They were pocked with row on row of dark triangular pits. Hundreds of small holes, thousands, rising in row after row. The ceiling was an endless arch, shining with the cold blue glow.

Andersen was lost for a moment in that dim vastness. Tiny in the distance, he was already halfway down the endless floor, stalking stiffly on toward a wide stair that led up to a long platform against the far wall.

"*¡Señor!*" His shout was a hoarse bark. "*¡Un momentito! ¡Un momentito por la humanidad!*"

Andersen lumbered on, ignoring him. Mondragon tried to run, and lost his breath. A yellow light flashed in his helmet, and he heard the computer's urgent female voice: *Warning! Cycler overload. Reduce air demand.*

He stumbled on, but Andersen reached the stair two hundred meters ahead, climbed it to the great stage, and marched on toward a huge black cylinder half embedded in the wall. It revolved as he approached. A deep niche moved into view. Andersen reeled into it. The cylinder turned again, and the platform was empty before Mondragon reached it.

A doorway? Into what?

He waited, hoping it would open again for him, or perhaps to let Andersen return. It didn't open. He set his helmet radio to its greatest power and called again. No response. He hammered his fists against the cylinder's slick black face. As useless, he thought, as pounding on a steel bank vault.

"*¡Socorro!*" he appealed to *los santos y la Madre sagrada*. "Make them set *El Señor* free, and I'll believe forever."

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Did he expect his mother's useless *santos* to rule *los demonios de hielo*? He tried to laugh and blundered blindly around the empty platform till a red light flashed in his helmet. A gong rang, and he heard the anxious female voice. *Warning! Air cartridge low. Terminate activity.*

He could only clench his fists. His time here was up. Andersen was gone. Hinch was dead. The gods of ice had left them nothing. Nothing except the duty to carry their report back to the ship. Yet what could they report? No good news for *la rubia*. Only that they had found the ice gods as unknowable and implacable as all gods were, using dreadful powers to protect the secrets of their temple.

The best he could do was to leave the spare cell where Andersen could find it, if they ever let him out. Mondragon laid it outside the door. Time to go, yet still he waited, calling with his helmet radio at the cylinder's blank black face and listening to the dreadful stillness until the red light flickered again and the computer chirped with its synthetic concern: *Warning! Terminate activity now!*

He walked back down the stair but stopped to look at those thousands of holes in the walls. They were a meter wide at the bottom, nearly twice as high. Each held a little pile of oddly shaped objects half buried in fine gray dust.

Curious, he reached for a narrow strip of something like plastic or thin glass. It was nearly two meters long, curved and tapered to a point at one end. Dully translucent when he held it toward the glowing ceiling, it had a faded amber color like nothing he had ever seen. He laid it back to inspect the one beside it. Its mirror image.

¡Que es!

Frowning, he dug others out of the dust. They came in pairs, he saw, right and left. Parts of things that had been alive? Squinting into the dark at the back of the pits, he saw that each held something round and yellow-white, a little larger than a human skull.

¡Craneos!

Skulls of the ice gods? Too far back for him to reach, they stared out of the dimness with hollow cavities that looked to be the empty sockets of huge and wide-spaced eyes. Smaller openings toward the sides might have been for ears or nostrils, though he saw no jaws or teeth.

Feeling a sudden chill, as if a billion years of frozen night had gotten into the airskin, he reached again for one of those long, translucent shells. A wing

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cover, perhaps, if the creature had been able to fly? Stirring the dust, he found brittle, thin-walled tubes that ended in hinge-like joints. Bones of arms or legs? Shivering, he laid them in the dust where they had been and backed away to frown again at the endless rows of holes in the walls above him, crypts for many thousand beings.

The necropolis of the ice gods?

Or had they been gods at all?

Warning! The red light had flickered again, and the computer voice trilled its digitized alarm. *Air cell near exhaustion. Terminate activity now.*

He looked back across that high stage. An altar to the absent gods? Whatever they had been. The black cylinder had not turned again. He called once more, and listened to the silent centuries. His mother had dreaded *fantasmas*, the evil ghosts of the dead, and he shuddered to a sudden sense that the tower was *una tumba embrujada*, a haunted tomb.

Had these dead creatures lit that spectral beacon to lure them across the frost to join them in death? He had always wanted to laugh at his mother's fears of *brujas*, of *los ojos malos y demonios de la noche*, but suddenly now the airskin felt cold with his sweat.

Breathing hard, he tried to hurry, tramping back across the acres of gray and empty floor beneath the graves of the dead ice gods, and on down the sloping tunnel. It seemed to stretch longer now, the choking darkness thicker. Fighting for breath, he stumbled giddily and stopped to wonder why he should hurry.

He was back in Chihuahua, lost at night on the hills above the village. He thought he saw lights below, but they were far off and the life was gone from his knees. Panting, he found no air. He fell, and did not try to stand. His father would surely find him when the sun came up, and he thought he could already smell the *tortillas de maíz y cabrito con chile* his mother would have ready for them at *la casa*.

Sleeping, he dreamed that he was on another world, far off among the stars. A strange world at first, because of the terrible winter. The sky was gray and dark. The sun was low in the east, an enormous dull-red ball that gave no heat. A bitter wind blew out of the north, drifting masses of broken ice across the sea beneath him.

He was numb and aching with the cold, yet his task absorbed him. He was riding a square block of dark stone. It was twenty times his height, yet

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he had learned the skill how to steer it. Keeping it safely above the ice, he guided his flight toward the sun and felt a thrill of pride when he saw the great walls they were building. *Un monumento* that should endure forever.

His *gente* were busy all about the island. He waited in the air till he saw *el amo* flying up to show him where the block must be set. When that was done, he could eat and rest and warm himself. He could sleep until *el amo* sent him back to the quarries —

"Carlos?" *El amo's* voice came faintly from somewhere far away. "Can you hear me?"

He didn't want to wake, because he was still cold and stiff and aching.

"Are you okay?"

El amo's voice had changed. He groaned and stretched and opened his eyes to find himself in a strange little box. A strange creature had seized the wing that was no longer a wing.

"Carlos, can you speak?"

Too cold and weak to move, he lay staring blankly around him till suddenly he knew that the box was the cabin of the scout. The creature was *El Doctor* Cruzet. His head ached, and his throat felt dry and painful. He fought for air till he found breath enough to speak.

"How — " He tried to sit up and sank back to breathe again. "How did I get here?"

"You came reeling out of the tower like a dead man." Cruzet bent closer, peering into his eyes as if he had been a dangerous stranger. "I helped you through the lock. Got your airskin off. Hours ago. I thought you were really dead."

"I think — I think I died," he whispered. "Yet they saved my life. *Gracias a Dios.* I don't know why. I don't know how."

"We don't know them." Cruzet shrugged, still frowning at him. "I'm not sure I want to know them."

He slept again, with no dreams. Stronger when he woke, and no longer shivering, he sat up to sip at the bitter syncafe Cruzet offered.

"*Una pesadilla.*" He shrank from Cruzet's questions. "A nightmare of evil I do not wish to remember." Yet he tried to tell what he could. "I never overtook *El Señor* Andy," he finished. "That strange door received him, and never let him out. I waited for him. Waited too long. My air failed. I fell and dreamed.

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"*Un sueño muy extraño.* I dreamed I was one of them, a creature that had wings. I was transporting great blocks of stone, riding them from some far-off quarry to build a tower. It seemed like this tower, though in another world. I flew above an ocean, toward an island. A strange sun was low in the east. *Enorme,* but red and very dim. It gave no heat — "

"I think you had more than a dream." Cruzet slowly nodded. "I think you saw this world as once it was." He frowned, thinking. "The sun must have seemed larger then, before tidal drag had pushed the planet so far out."

"*El Señor* Andy — "

"My friend." Cruzet swayed to a tired and bitter shrug. "Dead by now — "

"*Por verdad, Señor,* he is alive." Mondragon whispered the words, surprised at them. "He will return to us."

Cruzet squinted. "How do you know?"

"*Yo no sé.* But I am sure."

"If you are — " Cruzet stood back from him, eyes narrowed in thought. "I don't like what we've met here." He spoke at last, very calmly. "Something that has survived on this ice a billion years and more. Something that sensed us a million kilometers out. Something that shakes the planet like a bowl of jelly. And works men like puppets. It's beyond my comprehension."

"They frighten me." Mondragon shuddered. "Perhaps they defend the bones of their ancestors. Perhaps they don't. They killed *El Señor* Hinch. I think they saved my life. *El Señor* Andy — *¿Quien sabe?*"

"We haven't seen them, but they face us with a difficult predicament." Cruzet's steel calm surprised him. "A circumstance we must accept." His lean jaw jutted. "I'm going in, to look for Andy."

He got into his airskin.

"I'll take the holocam," he said. "We'll need pictures for Glengarth, if they'll let me take pictures. Give me twelve hours. If you don't see us coming out by then, try to get back to the ship."

"*¡Que Dios te bendiga!*" Mondragon stood up to stare through a window at the red-lit rubble and tall black shadow of the tower. "They are nothing we can understand."

"Pray for Andy," Cruzet begged him, "if you believe in prayer."

Breathing deep and thanking *los santos* for good air, he helped seal Cruzet's helmet and let him through the lock. "*Sagrado Jesus y los santos...*" He used to laugh when his mother wanted him to come with her to mass, but

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he was murmuring the old prayers he could recall as he watched Cruzet pick a way out of the heat lamp's glow and vanish into the tunnel.

Climbing into the bubble, he watched the tower and watched the stars, sadly thinking that *la rubia's* dream of terraforming would have to die. Groggy at last from watching, groggy for sleep, he brewed more syncafe and jogged in place and fought to stay alert. Six long hours had gone before Cruzet limped wearily out of the tunnel.

"No sign of Andy." Peeling his airskin off, he made a dismal shrug. "Except that something has taken the air cell from where you said you left it."

"He will come back." Mondragon filled their mug with hot syncafe. "We must wait."

"If you can tell me what they are — " In the bubble again, Cruzet stared up at the tower's topless shadow and turned back to stare at him. "Tell me what they want. Why they lit the beacon for us. And what they want."

"*Yo no sé.*"

"We must write up what we know." Cruzet tossed his shoulders in the manner of his own, and stood a moment squinting into the dark before he turned to the keyboard. "For whatever use it may be if we never get back."

Tapping the keys, he spoke aloud.

"The creatures were evidently bipedal, though half of them had at least vestigial wings. A sex difference, or perhaps the young had wings, shed as they aged? Skeletal features suggest that they originated as marine creatures or amphibians. To judge from the brain cases, they must have been as intelligent as we are. Smarter, perhaps, or they would never have survived."

"Or did they?" Mondragon shuddered. "*Los huesos*...The bones looked so very dead."

"One thing I do know." Cruzet rubbed at his reddened eyes. "I'm famished and dead for sleep."

When the log entry was typed, they made sandwiches of soyamax between omninute wafers and shared a bar of precious Earth chocolate they found in Hinch's bag. Taking turns, they watched and rested till Cruzet rolled out of his berth and reached for his airskin.

"One more look," he said. "Before we have to give him up and try to get back."

Gone only half an hour, he plodded heavily back from the tower and took a long time getting through the lock. Out of his airskin, he blinked at Mondragon in a dazed way before he spoke.

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"They've shut us out," he said. "Sealed up Hinch's hole in the wall."

Mondragon followed him forward. Reaching for the wheel, Cruzet stopped to stare blankly back at the tunnel mouth, his face as pale as if the frost had got into his bones.

"The seal's something like a dark concrete," he muttered as if to himself. "Smoothed even with the stone. Which means they must have come outside to finish it, though they didn't bother to clean up the debris from the blast." He shrugged and gripped the wheel. "I guess it means they're though with us."

Mondragon climbed into the bubble, watching the tower as Cruzet backed away and started down the slope to the frozen beach. Before they had gone a kilometer, he felt a sharp jolt. Cruzet stopped the scout and climbed into the bubble.

"What did you see?"

"*Nada, Señor.*"

"Too many quakes." Cruzet's iron control gave way to a shiver. "On a planet too old to quake. I don't like it, but we've got to try again."

He returned to the controls. Before they had rolled a dozen meters, another quake rocked them.

Five

THEY WERE sitting in the bubble, watching the tower and alert for anything, when Andersen came limping back around the rubble mountain. He stopped, staring as if the darkness confused him, and stumbled on toward them.

"*¡Gracias!*" Mondragon breathed. "*Gracias a todo de los santos.*"

He was waiting to help Andersen out of the lock.

"*¡Señor! ¿Como 'stá?*"

Swaying unsteadily, Andersen looked pale and drawn. He stood frowning through the stubble of red beard as blankly as if Mondragon had been a stranger, but the clumsy stiffness of *la máquina mala* was gone.

"*Señor,*" Mondragon whispered. "*¡Somos amigos!*"

"Thank God!" he murmured at last. "Thank God you waited."

"Andy?" Cruzet came down from the wheel. "What did they do to you?"

"Nothing." He shrugged and stumbled toward his berth. "But we had a conversation."

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"How — " Cruzet searched for words. "Tell us."

"Dead on my feet." He sank down to his berth. "Too groggy to talk, but they're letting us go. We can start back now."

Mondragon saw his haggard eyes fix on the syncafe machine and filled a mug for him. He gulped it down, held the mug out for more, and dropped it, asleep where he sat. Mondragon eased him down to the berth, pulled his boots off and spread a blanket over him.

"You heard him?" Cruzet whispered. "He said we can go?"

"*Si*," Mondragon murmured uncertainly. "I think."

"We'll try."

He turned the scout and drove cautiously away. No quake stopped them. Driving faster, he crossed the old beach and followed their track back toward the ship. Mondragon stood a long time over Andersen. His breathing was heavy. Once he stiffened and shouted incoherently in that dead voice, but seemed to relax when Mondragon spoke.

The tower was lost in the starlight behind when Mondragon went forward for his turn at the wheel. All he could see was stars and frost and their track, a thin dark scar stretched across the starlit flat infinity to the flat horizon. He watched the track and watched the stars and wondered what Andersen would say of *los demonios del hielo*.

A sudden jolt rocked the him.

"Carlos?" Cruzet shouted from the cabin. "Another quake?"

Frowning into the starlight, he found a dark and jagged mark across the track just ahead. He stopped the scout.

"*Un otro terremoto, yo creo.*" Climbing down the steps, he found Andersen sitting up on the side of his berth. "I think they want to keep us till they kill us. Like they killed *Señor* Hinch."

"Not so." Andersen stood up, yawning and stretching. "They promised not to harm us." He shuffled into the toilet to relieve himself and wash his face. He came back grinning at a water bottle and a dish of omninute wafers that Cruzet had set on the shelf at the end of the berth. "Though I thought they were going to starve me."

"*Señor*, there was another quake," Mondragon protested. "I see a split in the ice ahead of us."

"But not to stop us." He gulped water and sat back on the berth. "They were closing that crevasse that caught Hinch, so that we can leave. They're with us now."

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"If you're that sure — " Cruzet squinted sharply at him. "What are they? What do they want?"

"I'm famished." He picked up a wafer and laid it back. "But their story won't take long to tell. *They* is the wrong word, really. We were dealing with a single mind that has survived. A singular mind. Our scales of time never quite meshed, but it chills you through to know how old the planet is. I believe the last of them died before our Earth was born."

He stopped, staring at the bulkhead.

"So?" Cruzet urged him. "If they're all dead — "

"You can imagine the problem they faced at the end." He hunched his shoulders and pulled his arms against him, as if a cold wind had struck him. "Their sun and their planet were dying young. They'd hoped and worked to survive, but events conspired against them. They knew other worlds existed, but they'd failed to invent wavecraft or anything equivalent. What they did was to create an AI. An artificial intelligence designed to preserve the best of their civilization, a culture that must have been as advanced as our own — "

"Just a computer?" Cruzet interrupted him. "Playing its funny games with us?"

"A very serious game." Andersen shook his head. "It's nothing quite alive, as we define life, but it has been able to maintain and defend itself though all these ages. As it still intends to do. It tried to warn us away. It put a stop to Hinch when he became a threat. But now, since it learned about our wavecraft, it has accepted us. That gives it hope, if hope is the word for any

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AI. It sees a possibility that we can facilitate its program."

"Program?" Cruzet leaned to face him. "What's that?"

"Survival." Andersen paused, gazing off as if at something far away. "They are dead, but the AI is programmed to keep their culture alive. And I think something more than that. Call it their racial mind."

"It cares about us?"

"If an AI can care." He nodded, looking again at the wafers.

"I got it to understand our predicament here. Marooned on a world too cold for us, with no technology really adequate to keep us alive or get us away. I believe it intends to give us the science and resources we may need."

"And in return?" Cruzet stiffened, eyes narrowed doubtfully. "What does it want?"

"It asks for nothing." A quizzical shrug. "Except for us to learn their culture and their science. To become a new vehicle for the mind of their race. I don't get all the implications, but it's giving us time to learn what it wants us to know. It's used to taking time."

"That's all?" Cruzet sat down on the opposite berth, staring at him. "Really all?"

"Enough. Quite enough, when you think about it."

He reached for the wafers.

"*¿De verdad, Señor?*" Mondragon shook his head. "¿Truly, *hay no demonios*?"

"Only a program in a machine." The haunted eyes came to rest on him.

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"Yet I think it should be called a mind."

"*¿Que es la nigromancia mala?* The evil magic that raised a wall of ice to stop us and opened that pit to swallow *Señor* Hinch?"

"Magic to us. Science to them." He leaned for another wafer. "I inquired. Toward the end, they tried to escape the cold by going underground. They built heat engines to use the heat left in the planet's core. Cooling finally shrank it, causing tectonic stresses that had to be controlled. They learned to stop quakes and make quakes. Cold as the surface is now, there's still core heat left they can tap in emergencies such as our arrival."

"*Muy extraño,*" Mondragon whispered. "More than I can understand."

"And I." Andersen shrugged. "We'll all have enough to learn." He got to his feet. "I'm getting some breakfast," he told Cruzet. "But we can be driving on."

"*¿La raja, Señor?* That crack in the ice?"

"They promised to close it for us. Perhaps with the shock we felt."

"*Bien, Señor. Muy bien,* if that is true."

It was true. *La raja* was only a narrow mark across the frost when they reached it. Driving on, he followed their track toward the ship and groped for *entendimiento.*

"Will the science of *los muertos* allow the wavecraft to be launched again?" he asked Cruzet. "Perhaps to find the better world we hoped for? Or will *La Doctora Rima* be enabled to terraform the planet as she wished?"

"Who knows?" Cruzet shrugged and turned to stare across the frost ahead. "We'll be learning. Learning quite a lot."

"When I was a child," Mondragon said, "my mother used to tell of three wise kings who came with gifts from the east. They never came to Cuerno del Oro with anything for me, but now I think we may become *los tres hombres sabios* of this dark world."

"Why not?" Smiling, Cruzet nodded. "The future they have promised is a richer gift than I ever imagined."

Los muertos had touched him, he thought, when they saved his life. Touched him with the edge of their wisdom. That had made him something more than *el pobre mojado* he had been.

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

MARCH WILL COME in like a lion when our issue lands in your mailbox. We have planned a whole series of surprises.

George Alec Effinger returns with one of his Maureen Birnbaum stories. This time Maureen, who likes to think of herself as a barbarian swordswoman and who travels through time and space, meets the ultimate villain: the eldritch, ichorous evil of H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos. Only the evil appears in a most unusual place — Yale in 1966. Is Maureen up to this challenge? You'll have to wait until next month to find out.

The second surprise of the March issue comes from **Michael F. Flynn**. Michael, known for his wonderful hard science fiction stories in *Analog*, has turned his back on the sf tradition to write (gak!) a high fantasy story. But, it turns out, he writes high fantasy with the same kind of discipline and attention to details that make his science fiction such a joy to read. "The Promise of God" is about magic that extracts a price from the user's conscience, and the devastating results....

Robert Onopa also creates a moral conundrum, but he does so in a world full of cars. Travel in the future has evolved so that the Nomads in the United States never leave their vehicles. Residents, on the other hand, have apartments, jobs, and permanence. But what happens when a Resident accidentally ends up on a Nomad vehicle? Can he adapt to life on the road? "Traffic" inspired our cover, done by the one, the only **Kent Bash**.

In the next few months, we have all sorts of delightful fare. **Ray Bradbury** will return with a wonderful, whimsical story of the ghosts of Hollywood. **Ian Watson** will tell the tale of "The Amber Room." And **John Kessel, James Patrick Kelly,** and **Jonathan Lethem** team up to write one of the most powerful science fiction stories you will read all year. So make certain your subscription is current. You will want to read each and every issue.

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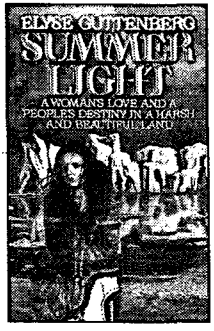

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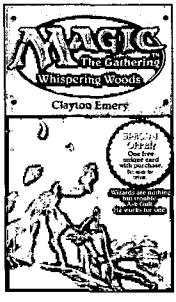

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